

SUMMER 1950

ONE & SIXPENCE

NEW WORLDS

fiction of the fut



Just Published

The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism

by Rev. Dr.
MONTAGUE SUMMERS

Many of the facts in this absorbing book might seem too amazing to stand alone, but supported as they are by the certificates of doctors and psychological specialists, it is impossible to ignore them.
12 halftone plates, 264 pages. **21/-**

The Unique Bedside Book **Weather Lore**

by **RICHARD INWARDS, F.R.A.S.**

4th Edition revised and edited by E. L. Hawke,
M.A. for the Royal Meteorological Society

Taken from the world's literature and the age-old wisdom of farmers, mariners, bird watchers... concerning plants, birds, animals, clouds, rainbows, stars, etc.
10 halftone plates, 252 pages. **15/-**

Very Peculiar People

by **E. J. DINGWALL,**
M.A., D.Sc., Ph.D.

Author of "Some Human Oddities," etc.

Fascinating portrait studies of peculiar, or abnormal, personalities and an analysis of the psychological problems they present.
11 halftone plates, 224 pages. **18/-**

Reincarnation for Everyman

by **SHAW DESMOND**

An introduction to one of the most ancient beliefs about human life, written to give a clear and simple understanding of the theory and practice of rebirth.
244 pages. **8/6**

In My Mind's Eye

by **FREDERICK MARION**

In a foreword to the book Drs. Thouless and Wiesner state: "Marion shows paranormal capacities of an unusually high order under strictly controlled experimental conditions." "He has certainly written a readable and unusual book."—*Manchester Guardian*. "... will find in it many things to engage not only their interest but their profoundest speculations."—*Truth*.
7 halftone plates, 272 pages. **18/-**

Reprinted by Popular Demand

Land of a Thousand Buddhas

(2nd Impression)

by **THEOS BERNARD**
M.A., LI.B., Ph.D.

Author of "Heaven Lies Within Us"
(2nd Impression), etc.

"His description of the terrific ordeal of initiation to the Order of Lamas is of peculiar interest."—*The Times*.
65 photographs, 320 pages. **25/-**

The Projection of the Astral Body

(4th Impression)

by **S. MULDOON and
H. CARRINGTON**

For some years out of print, this book is now re-issued in response to a pressing demand. Mr. Muldoon's remarkable account of experiences in astral projection, edited by Dr. Hereward Carrington, one of the world's best known psychic researchers, has long been regarded as a classic of its kind.
Illustrated. **18/-**

A Search in Secret India (15th Imp.)

by **Paul Brunton** **17/6**

A Search in Secret Egypt (9th Imp.)

by **Paul Brunton** **20/-**

How You Live When You Die (7th

Imp.) by **Shaw Desmond** **10/6**

Love After Death (3rd Imp.)

by **Shaw Desmond** **10/6**

Finding of the Third Eye (6th Imp.)

by **Vera Stanley Alder** **8/6**

The Science of Hypnotism (5th

Imp.) by **Alexander Cannon** **7/6**

Hypnotic Power (3rd Imp.)

by **Colin Bennett** **9/6**

The Science of Spirit Healing

(6th Imp.) by **Harry Edwards** **10/6**

My Letters from Heaven (2nd

Imp.) by **Winifred Graham** **6/-**

Write for latest catalogue (to Desk 41) enclosing 1d. stamp

47 Princes Gate

RIDER

London, S.W.7

NEW WORLDS

fiction of the future

VOLUME 3

SUMMER 1950

NUMBER 7

CONTENTS

Novelettes:

THE DAWN BREAKS RED	...	...	...	by John Brody	4
PLAGIARIST	...	...	...	by Peter Phillips	54

Short Stories:

MARTIAN'S FANCY	...	...	...	by William F. Temple	38
QUEST	...	...	...	by F. G. Rayer	80

Features:

EDITORIAL	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	2
THE LITERARY LINE-UP	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	78
BOOK REVIEW	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	79

Editor: JOHN CARNELL

Cover: CLOTHIER

Illustrations: CLOTHIER & HUNTER

ONE SHILLING AND SIXPENCE

In Canada and United States of America, 30 cents

All characters in these stories are purely fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is entirely coincidental.

No responsibility is accepted for material submitted for publication, but every care will be taken to avoid loss or damage. Return postage must be enclosed with all MSS.

Published by NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD., 25 STOKE NEWINGTON ROAD,
LONDON, N.16

Good Companions

WITH each successive issue the prestige, contents and circulation of *New Worlds* is increasing in range. That is no more than was expected or planned by myself and the rest of the staff of Nova Publications. But the success of this magazine has rested largely with you readers, and your response and enthusiasm to recent issues has prompted us to put into operation the second phase for producing good British science fiction in this country. Indirectly, too, it is our way of saying "Thank you" for your support.

In August, Nova Publications will launch its second regular quarterly publication dealing specifically with science fiction, and alternating with *New Worlds*. It will be titled *Science-Fantasy* and will be edited by Walter Gillings, who has been identified with this field for twenty years and is internationally known as editor of the first British magazine of science fiction, *Tales of Wonder*, published between 1937 and 1942. Subsequently, he was responsible for launching *Fantasy—The Magazine of Science Fiction*, which was hailed as the best British publication of its kind at the time but was prevented from developing further than three issues by continued restrictions on periodicals.

Many readers of *New Worlds* will also identify Walter Gillings as editor/publisher of *Science-Fantasy Review*, the unique quarterly magazine which covers the whole range of the fantasy field with reviews, articles, interviews with authors, and general items of universal interest.

Those readers who have enjoyed the features in *Science-Fantasy Review* will more readily appreciate the fact that Mr. Gillings plans to incorporate the best of them in the new Nova magazine *Science-Fantasy*. Apart from presenting first-class fiction by such well-known authors as Arthur C. Clarke, John Russell Fearn, J. M. Walsh, A. Bertram Chandler, Peter Phillips, William F. Temple, F. G. Rayer, and many others who have written or are now writing stories especially for this new magazine, he will present articles and features which cover every aspect of the field, dealing with the facts and speculations which are the substance of science-fantasy, as well as book reviews and interviews with prominent personalities.

The new reader of science fiction will find *Science-Fantasy* more illuminating than any magazine of the kind he has ever encountered, and enthusiasts who wish to keep pace with the constant expansion of this intriguing literature will also find their interests adequately catered for.

I have no doubt that *Science-Fantasy* will be a worthy companion to *New Worlds*, and look forward to the friendly rivalry expected to grow up between the two magazines, which, in its turn will be a vital stimulant to each, precluding any sense of self-satisfaction upon either editor's part.

Editors, like authors, view the same things from different angles, and it is this freshness of vision which will ensure the two magazines an individual personality.

I am quite confident that all readers of *New Worlds* will require *Science-Fantasy* regularly. Like *New Worlds*, it is going to sell out completely. Just to make sure, better place that order right away for the first issue, due in August.

BOYS' magazines and comics have for long been a medium for good juvenile science fiction stories, and many an older reader can hark back to his boyhood days and remember the exciting adventures in the *Boy's Magazine*, *Nelson Lee Library*, *Union Jack*, and others of twenty years or more ago. In fact, he'll probably agree that it was those juvenile "horrors" that first set him along the road to regularly reading futuristic stories.

Each generation seems to have its crop of juveniles—those mentioned above were in the early 1920's, and were superseded by the *Wizard*, *Hotspur*, and *Scoops*. The late 1930's produced *Modern Wonder*, which carried illustrated science articles as well as fiction (John Beynon had one of his best stories published therein). But since 1939 there has been no first-class juvenile weekly devoted to futuristic fiction.

It was, therefore, with great personal pleasure, I saw the first issue of the new Hulton Press juvenile *Eagle* heralded in recently with plenty of advance publicity. Subsequently, it gave me a very warm feeling to know this national juvenile weekly is selling out everywhere. Edited by a clergyman, who devised and designed it prior to submitting it to Hulton Press, it carries a strip-cartoon adventure on Venus, and regular science-fiction stories with a strong juvenile appeal. Not without a little pride, author Clarke informs me that he has sold a story to the *Eagle*.

Here, again, is this generation's focal point for stimulating thought. Just as the boys of two generations ago—many of them now technicians on atomics, aeronautics, astronomy, rocket propulsion—looked up to the moon and stars and wondered when Man would bridge the gap, so will the boys of today look and wonder—and perhaps be able to do a little more about it when they are older.

Nova Publications salutes another "good companion" on the road to the stars.

JOHN CARNELL



THE DAWN BREAKS RED

By JOHN BRODY

After the total breakdown of atomic power there only remained a few isolated islands of culture—and barbarism. But the barbarians fostered a new race of mental mutants, and they held the key to the stars.

(The sequel to "World In Shadow")

Illustrated by CLOTHIER

I

DICK MAYBACH sat before a drawing-board set on a table on the verandah of his cabin. The neat wooden building was perched on a ledge cut in the northern slope of the valley, and from his chair he could look out over the roofs of a hundred or more cabins and larger structures to the rising southern side of the valley. The high, pine-covered slope facing him did not reach to the altitude of his own cabin, so that he could see over the crest and away into the distance, a vista of pine trees stretching in unbroken formation to the blue haze that hid the mountains and the horizon. Beyond the horizon was the ruin of a civilisation, the crumpled fabric of an age.

"A penny for them, Dick!" It was Veronica, his wife, standing at his elbow.

He smiled dreamily. "I was wondering what was left—out there," he said. "How much survived, and how much went down. Whether they are all dead, or cutting each others throats, or building afresh."

"Man is an adaptable animal," she said. "That's why he is the Lord of Creation—or thinks he is. I expect millions survived and are working like beavers to reconstruct a semblance of civilisation. How's the drawing going, darling? Struck any more pot-holes?"

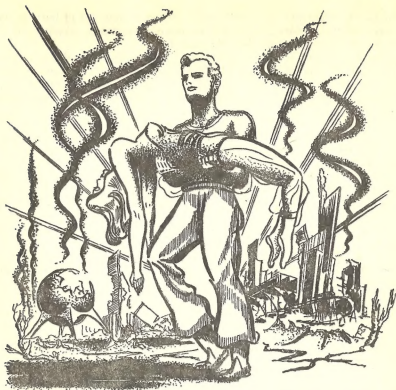
HE SAT back from the big drawing-board, staring moodily at the maze of lines. "At this rate it will be a year before we can even begin to construct the plant," he commented. "Ten of us! Working away to plan a machine my father designed in a year—and he was working from scratch!"

"What's holding you up?"

"Little, elementary things. Hagon—he's doing the Maybach Chamber layout—wants a triple feed-back through the pile controls. It sounds all right in theory, but I shall have to screen all the network in case the gammas start a secondary action through passing too near the pile, and that means that I shall lose power in the transmission lines. Just a small tertiary circuit, yet the devil's own job to fit in."

"You must show me in more detail," Veronica said. "After lunch—maybe I'll have a flash of intuition!"

She went back into the cabin, leaving Dick alone. Veronica had



changed immeasurably since the blackout. He remembered her before they had sabotaged the world power grid. Just a girl then, without the least scrap of technical knowledge, very bored when he started to talk about even the simplest electronic problems. It was her complete lack of interest in the world about her, her desire for superficial thrills, that had led her unerringly into the Burnside Mentasthetic Centre.

And now? She possessed a zest for life, an inner life-force that seemed to make her almost glow with the joy of living. For a moment Dick allowed his thoughts to wander over his wife. Her hair, once dark, was now the purest white—an after-effect of that awful night at the centre—and yet it had none of the dead brittleness of white hair, but was so glossy that it gave her something of the crowning glory of a goddess. Yes, there was a lot of the goddess in Veronica now, even down to the extraordinary flashes of intuition which she produced on occasion to help her husband.

A week back he had been held up over the design of an automatic control circuit to prevent the over-wave of the Maybach Chamber building up backlash in the main transmission circuit. She had stared at the complicated paper layout for five minutes, and then suggested he put 'some sort of trap-door' to quote her own words, 'in that squiggly wire linking the chamber screening with the high-voltage grid.' He had translated her 'trapdoor' into condenser, studied the circuit for five hours, and decided that unknowingly

she had hit the nail right on the head. When he told her of her successful solving of the problem, she had been more interested in whether the cake she had in the oven would be light enough.

"Lunch, darling!" He slipped out of his reverie, threw down his pencil and went into the cabin. Veronica had turned the rough log building into a model home; it seemed that there was no end to her ingenuity, and there was certainly no other cabin in the settlement that approached the Maybach's in comfort.

"You're very thoughtful," Veronica said, busy with dishes.

"I keep wondering if we did the right thing, darling. I mean, the blackout."

She laughed grimly. "Do doctors hesitate to cut out cancerous growths?" she asked, sitting down.

"But think of all the people who died as the result of our action. You might have been one of them."

"Did we deserve to live? It is a case of the survival of the fittest, lifted out of the jungle. The best go on, destroying the second best."

"You're strange, Veronica. Before we blasted the power grid, physical force was an anathema to you. I remember how upset you were when the guards killed those natives in the African rising. Yet now you remember the murder of countless millions—of which you might have been one—as a necessary, even laudable action."

"I can see so much more clearly now, Dick. If things had gone on as they were, with more and more people going to the Mentasthetic Centres, choosing sweet dreams to boring reality, then civilisation would have died anyway. Instead, you and your friends blasted every power plant in the world so that mankind had to struggle or die out. I can see it so clearly, without any sentiment or sorrow to obscure my vision."

"You know," Dick said, laying down his fork, "When we planned to carry out the disruption, we knew that a lot of people were going to die. It worried us; no amount of clear thinking could convince us that we were completely right in destroying human life."

"It wouldn't have worried me," Veronica said sharply. "I should have known what was right, and I would have pulled the switches with complete confidence. The race must go on to the great things that are awaiting it!"

She spoke with a proud lifting of her head, and Dick felt again that strange twinge that told him that Veronica was not the same girl he had known before the blackout. It was as though on that desperate night at the Centre, he had rescued another, a different woman, a complete stranger. The Veronica of Burnside had been a gentle, lovable creature; the Veronica of Henderson Settlement possessed a brain like a surgeon's knife, keen and ruthless.

"I'm going down to the Chief's," Dick said suddenly. "He's holding a conference this afternoon. I don't suppose I shall be back until seven or eight, darling."

"O.K. I've got to go to the new children's centre anyway, so I don't suppose I shall be back early. Seems like I shan't be able to solve your problem today, eh?"

They laughed; Veronica's intuition was beginning to be a crusty joke with them. She had used it too often and in too concrete a form for its ability to be disputed. That was just another quality of the new Veronica that puzzled Dick.

The conference was the usual co-ordinating affair. Each of the dozen settlements scattered throughout the world had been set a problem to solve, and Henderson Settlement had to produce a working atomic power bank. Ivanov Settlement, in the steppes of Central Asia was building a space-ship, Barron Settlement in South America was evolving a world-state farm, Varker Settlement in Australia was battling with disease and human evolution. Each had its task; when all had completed, blueprints would be passed around, and the knowledge gained exploited to the full. Technicians were exchanged, so that each settlement housed the men best able to solve its particular problem.

The power bank to be built at Henderson Settlement was the key to the future, and that was why a limit of twelve months for design had been fixed. In the blackout, the great regional atomic plants had been burnt to cinders and fused metal, and the surviving technicians knew only their own particular slant on the whole. Dick Maybach had been control engineer at Burnside, and knew the layout of controls and automatics, but the Maybach Chamber was a mystery to him. The Chamber was tackled by a Russian who had been motorman at the Dnieper power bank before the blackout. Transmission was in the hands of a Chinaman, Hai Soo, one-time linesman on the Yellow River.

Once a week all the technicians met under the chairmanship of Henderson Senior, the Chief, and they would thrash out problems that affected the whole plan. Henderson would pass on to other settlements any valuable information gained, so that slowly a world-wide network of knowledge was being built up.

Dick followed a fused silica path down the slope of the pine-covered hillside, and was soon in the centre of the settlement. Henderson had planned his settlement a year or more before the sabotage of the power grid, and in the period before the blackout, he had caused to be constructed several large aluminium hangars fully equipped for research work and industrial production in a small way. When the technicians had moved in, they had found a plutonium pile already built, and a number of auxiliary power plants nearly completed, not to mention adequate stocks of radio-active ores and alloys stored in galleries cut in the hillside.

Henderson himself lived in a picturesque brick-built bungalow close to the hangars, and in his comfortably furnished living-room, Dick found the other half dozen technicians awaiting him. The conference set to work, thrashing out details of design for the monster power bank, arguing points, planning the next week's work, laughing and squabbling. Henderson, however, allowed nothing to confuse, and under his expert, if ruthless, chairmanship, the business was disposed of by six o'clock, and Dick gathered his papers to depart.

"A moment, Dick," Henderson said. "Stay and have a dish of tea with me."

DICK sat down again, and tea was brought in by Henderson's daughter-in-law. "Junior," Henderson's son, so called by everyone in the settlement and beyond because he was unquestionably the one to take his father's place when the old man dropped the guiding reins, set himself beside Dick, and the girl poured tea and passed round sandwiches.

"Dick," the old man said. "What do you think's going on beyond the forest?"

Dick laughed. "Funny you should ask that," he said. "I asked Veronica the same question a few hours back."

"But what *do* you think is going on?"

"I can't say. I suppose world government broke down when communications went. That would mean a breakdown to a town and village level, and as starvation set in, towns would break up, and eventually the biggest unit would become the village."

"And technically and intellectually?"

"Chaos, I suppose. Even the smallest laboratory and the smallest industrial unit depended on the main power grid, so when that went, technology would go with it. As the standard of life went haywire, so culture and intellect would follow suit."

"Then how do you see things out there?"

"Well, I suppose village units function on a purely barter basis, with some degree of local security. Between villages, large areas filled with bandits, living insecurely on what they can get by looting and pillage of villages."

"Then you see no step forward, nor even a *status quo ante*, but a definite backward jerk?"

"Definitely!"

Henderson brought out his favourite pipe, and began to breathe clouds of smoke across the small room. Dick's mind wandered back across months to the first time he had met Henderson; there had been the same interrogation, the same quickfire of questions leading up to and preparing the ground for Henderson's main dissertation. The pipe was the signal; the ground was ploughed and ready and the seed was about to be scattered.

"I'm not satisfied," Henderson said slowly. "There's a new factor in the calculations, one that we did not anticipate when we planned the blackout. The general idea was that we should give the world a sharp jerk, through which we should hurl people back a thousand years. In the meantime, the settlements would go on building up their leadership, ready to guide the stunned world back into the grooves of progress. Well, we gave the world its jerk all right, by slashing open the power grid and in an instant stopping every machine dead in its tracks. At the same time we killed the Mentasthetic Centres, which had already absorbed nearly half the world's population into the dream chambers."

HE puffed for a moment. "But has the plan worked out?" he went on. "Are the people out there really stunned, are they weathering down into the sort of thing we are to work on? In theory they should be, but in practice? There is this new factor operating, and I can't reckon without it."

"What is the new factor, sir?" Dick asked.

"I don't know. That's the damnable part of it. When the world-wide chain of settlements were planned, it was decided that we should insulate ourselves from the outside, presumably chaotic, world. At the time it seemed the natural decision if these settlements were to be a success, for if they communicated with the world at large, they might well be swamped in the flood of barbarism expected. But now the time for insulation, security, has passed. There is a factor abroad in the world and we must discover what it is. My suspicions have been confirmed from the other settlements, and it has been decided that we should all send out spies into enemy territory, to

evaluate the state of affairs. Then we shall hold a conference and decide how the master-plan shall be altered."

Henderson ceased speaking, and for long minutes there was silence in the greying room. Somehow Dick always found it difficult to realise that there were other settlements, twelve of them, scattered throughout the world. Henderson Settlement was so self-contained, so much an island filled with people who knew each other, and remembered a different past. Yet other settlements did exist, and communication by radio was established, with daily call-ups, daily passage of technical and general information. Henderson would speak to other settlement leaders, discuss local conditions, suggest and advise where needed. There was actual physical contact; once a week a jet ship would swoop in from south, east or west, hover with stabilisers flaming red, to land on the cleared strip lower in the valley. There would be dispatches, long technical reports, settlement news-sheets, photographs. The plane would take off, perhaps carrying liaison officers or technicians who were required in other settlements for emergency duties.

Dick himself had been hurried once in a jet ship to Carlos Settlement in the Peruvian Alps to fix the control bank of the local power plant which had blown out and immobilised the life of the community. It had been his first brief contact with other settlements, and every moment had been precious.

"To come to the point," Henderson went on, "I've decided to send you, Dick, and my son over the forests to the vicinity of Burnside, to find out just exactly what's going on there."

"A sort of social report, sir?"

"You could call it that. I want to know how people are taking the complete reversal of their way of life. I want to know to what extent they have organised, and what new social factors have entered into life. I want you two to feel the pulse of the world beyond the forest, and return here within a week. And, what's more, I want you both back, alive and kicking. No trouble, see?"

Junior grinned. "O.K., pa," he said. "We'll go, see and return—I hope!"

"How do we get there?" Dick demanded, his pulses throbbing at the exciting prospect ahead.

"You'll go by helicopter, and put down somewhere near the edge of the forest. After that, it's up to you, though I recommend a couple of blasters in case you meet savages!"

In a quarter of an hour Dick and Henderson Junior had made their plans. They were going to take off at three a.m., and put down at dawn in one of the many clearings five or six miles out of Burnside. There were maps to be got ready, food to be prepared, blasters to be drawn from store, checked and placed in the helicop. Both men left to get to work on the preparations.

"I SHOULD be coming!" Veronica snapped as soon as Dick had revealed the plan to her.

"Why?"

"I don't know. I've an intuition that I would be useful to you. I can think so clearly—and you may get into trouble, darling."

"If I get into trouble, Veronica, I'd far rather you were back here. Intuition's a good thing in a woman when she confines it to the home."

She laughed. "Maybe. But I still think I'd be useful. I know you can't understand it, but I have an irresistible urge to go back to Burnside. I can't

explain it, but it's as though all my relatives, living and dead, were waiting for me there. Sooner or later I've got to make contact with that invisible army."

"You give me the willies. Aren't you happy here?"

"Happy, yes. But complete? No. There's something missing. I should be out there, Dick. That's where I belong."

Dick knew she was right. She had changed since the blackout so completely that he was still crystallising in his mind some of the facets of her new personality. She was the only person in the settlement who had been to a Mentasthetic Centre, and she was distinguished by her beautiful white hair and by her uncanny aloofness. She mixed with the other women, she was popular with the men, yet no one called her friend, no one treated her with familiarity. Yet before the blackout she had been one of those people who made friends in every sphere of life—real, enduring friendships that stood the test of time. In fact, it was the call of friendship that made her enter the Mentasthetic Centre at Burnside.

Particularly Dick had noted the change in relationship between himself and his wife. Before the blackout they had been happy; despite the long periods of boredom that assailed Veronica, sapping her morale, they had been friends as well as lovers; there had been a mental tie between them as well as a physical one. But the new Veronica was a different proposition, for though they were still lovers, there was a gulf between them. No longer did they spend long evenings before a fire, understanding each other so perfectly that words were unnecessary. It was as if Veronica's mind had moved through a dimension, so that its general co-ordinates were different to those of Dick's, and complete understanding was impossible.

WHEN she told Dick that something was missing from her life, he reluctantly understood. He felt that she must feel as a man, stranded on a desert island with a bunch of black people, must feel when he longed for people of his own kind to come to him. There was some element missing in Henderson Settlement, an element that Veronica longed for, an element that could only be found out there beyond the forest. Vaguely he remembered Henderson speaking of a 'new factor' in human calculations, and wondered whether the mysterious factor connected up in any way with Veronica's strange element.

But there was no time for speculation. He got to work, packing a rucksack with essentials, storing a hard ration in a small haversack. There were directions to Veronica, time for a last lingering embrace, and then they went together to the central hangars.

"All set?" Henderson Junior hailed him.

"Sure, Junior. Is the helicop buzzing?"

"Nicely, Dick, though I wish we were taking a jet ship. If I don't get my hands on the controls of a rocket soon, I'll lose my touch."

Young Henderson was a jet designer, and before the blackout he had been one of the world's leading experts on ship design and handling. Although a genius in his way at design, he was happiest when he sat in a fast ship and tore the night open with bands of fire. The helicop, to him, was an invention of the Devil as it clip-clopped its slow way across the sky.

"Now, don't forget," Henderson Senior said. "I want a report worth

having out of you two. Steer clear of trouble, use your eyes and your heads, and come back. Above all, I say, come back. Now you'd better get moving."

"O.K. Dad," his son said, climbing into the narrow cabin of the machine. "We'll be back in a week."

"Goodbye, darling," Dick whispered to Veronica, kissing the top of her white hair. "Look after yourself."

He climbed in beside Henderson Junior, and a moment later the tiny power-unit under their feet started its characteristic buzzing. Above their heads the big prop began to rotate, and in a couple of minutes they were a hundred feet up and moving over the forest.

"Got any plans?" Henderson asked, busy with the controls.

"If we set her down where I showed you on the map, Junior, we'll be a matter of a mile or two from my old house in Burnside. I suggest we go there first, and then find out if any of my late neighbours are still around. We'll have to go carefully, but some of them were good chaps and would be useful jumping off points."

Below them the forest was dark and remote, stretching to join the blue velvet of the sky. There was no light but that of the stars, no sound but the steady thrust of the canted prop.

"I could walk faster than this," Henderson grunted.

Dick laughed. "You won't be happy until you've got a ship under you that'll take you to Mars," he said.

"Mars! Hell, I'm planning on something that will go further than that. There's nothing in the solar system worth exploring, Dick. Mars and Venus are the only planets we'll be able to make a landing on, and one's frozen and the other's wet. No sir, I'm heading for the stars!"

"You intend living a long time, Junior!"

"Maybe not so long, Dick. Once we've broken clear of this planet, there'll be no end to it, you see. Once we've perfected an overdrive that'll allow accelerations up to the speed of light, then we shall reach out and pluck the Galaxy to our bosoms!"

"And then, I suppose, there'll be chaps like you, Junior, wanting to burst out of the Galaxy and reach the nebulae."

"Even that's not impossible. The trouble lies in producing alloys that will withstand the passage at supra-light speeds through the tenuous atmosphere of space. There's only about one atom to the square yard, but at colossal speeds even that concentration will cause immense frictional heat. Still, Dickie boy, man's got about 10 million years ahead of him on this planet alone, and if he hasn't found somewhere to live by then, he deserves to go under."

"But there are a lot of things that might happen," Dick objected. "I mean, look at the danger we've just escaped. With nearly half the world population in the grip of Mentasthenia, we looked within a hair's breadth of destruction by sheer inertia. If we hadn't blown the power grid, destroyed the centres, with nearly everyone in them, man would have died out."

"Nonsense, Dick. The human race might have suffered a set-back of a hundred—even a thousand years. But someone would have survived, and what's hundred years in ten million? No, Dick, we're going on and on, until the whole Universe has been revealed to us, and the purpose of the great Creator laid bare. Then, and then only shall we know our true destiny!"

Far away ahead of them a yellow light twinkled among the trees. Their

journey was done; they had reached the world beyond the forest.

II

"THAT was my house!" Dick said, pointing through the mist towards a square white building that sat among terraces and rockeries. "It looks dirty and deserted. Let's go a bit closer; perhaps we can shelter there."

They were a quarter of a mile off, yet even at that distance they could see the black smudges that marred the white walls. As they crossed the strip of broken ground that separated them from the slight rise, they saw that the house was much more dirty and decrepid than a year's emptiness and neglect could account for, and as they climbed the path towards it, the truth became painfully obvious.

"Burnt out!" Dick cried. "God Almighty!"

"Burnt to a cinder inside," Henderson observed. "Only the outer walls left standing. Well, there goes our comfortable hiding place!"

"We'd best stop here, though," Dick said. "We'll attract no attention. Burnt! I wonder what happened. Veronica will take this damn badly, I'm thinking."

"I suppose we'd better go inside and make some sort of camp. As you say, we're not likely to be worried here; it'll make a good base and it's not far from the helicop."

They settled into the blackened shell as best they could, rigging a mackintosh sheet over a pair of charred rafters, and dumping their equipment on the damp, littered floor.

"I'll give you the lie of the land," Dick said. He crossed to a window aperture. "Over there, beyond that hill, was the power-bank where I was control engineer. The town centre lies down there to the south. The nearest neighbour was a chap called Higgs who lives in that place you can see behind those trees. A good fellow, Higgs. If he's still around, we won't go far wrong if we look him up."

"Any other neighbours?"

"You can see how the houses follow the slope of the valley down towards the town centre. The Mentasthetic Centre's beyond that ridge, a great white stone place. God, it seems only yesterday that I went there to get Veronica out!"

He had gone straight from the power-bank, once the job of feeding back power into the main atomic plant had been carried out. Before the white hot conductors had burnt out, Dick had been walking across the parking place before the power-bank, the Security Guards falling back before him in stupid amazement. The others who had come with him had taken the helicop off to the settlement, Henderson promising to pick him up at the same point twenty-four hours later.

Dick had arrived at the Mentasthetic Centre an hour after the blackout, and had rushed straight into the Director's room. At first he thought no one was there, for the light would not work, and no one moved or spoke to him. But his flashlamp picked out the naked truth, the bald-headed figure slumped over the shining desk top, the small glass and bottle of poison tablets still standing before him. The Director had taken the easy road out of the battle.

Dick left him. Veronica, he knew, was on the top floor of the vast building, and he raced up a never-ending staircase, slipping on the polished marble,

falling, recovering himself and racing on again. He reached the top, and hurled himself at a pair of bronze doors; they gave under his attack, and he was in the great hangar-like room, with the thousands of divans arranged in aisles and columns spread before him.

There were others there too, he noticed. He joined a group about a divan. A young doctor in a white coat worked swiftly in the light of a torch held by a nurse, slipping the feeding tubes from the incisions in the legs of the patients, dressing the wounds and bandaging them. He did not even look up at Dick when he approached.

"What goes on?" Dick rapped at the nurse.

"We're saving those we can," she whispered. "They'll be coming too in a moment, I expect, and unless we can get the tubes out and the wounds dressed, they'll bleed to death."

Dick looked down the endless rows of divans, white tombstones in the semi-darkness.

"Of course," the nurse went on, "we won't save many. The doctors dressed over fifty in half an hour, but we've got ten thousand on this floor alone!"

DICK waited no longer. Flashing his light on to corpse-like figure after figure, he searched for Veronica. Women stared up at him, men, children, beautiful people, old people, people of every race and description, yet his light did not reveal Veronica. He covered one aisle, started another, aware with terrible fear that he must find her quickly or she would die in the maelstrom of horror that must occur when the patients started to awake, move, and tear the tubes from the veins and arteries.

He was almost despairing when his light fell on the glorious, peaceful face of his wife, and he shouted with joy. In a moment he was back at the doctor's side.

"Quick!" he rapped. "My wife's over here. Come and fix her."

"I'll take them in order!" the young man snapped, busy with forceps and dressings.

"You'll do my wife!" Dick cried, a trace of frenzy in his voice. "You'll fix her or I'll fix you!"

His blaster came out, ugly, short and dangerous. "Come on!" he rapped.

The doctor looked up, his young face a mask of weariness and defeat. He shrugged his shoulders, muttering "One's as good as another!" He finished the patient he worked on, and then passed down the aisle until he came to Veronica. Dick watched him closely as he stripped the tubes from the white leg, clipped the wound, poured in drugs, applied dressings and bandaged.

"She'll do," the doctor said at last. "She'll probably be as mad as a hatter when she comes round, but you asked me to. God! They're moving!"

Dick looked about him, a thrill of horror creasing his spine. The dimly lit room had changed from morgue to chamber of horrors. Here and there ghostly white figures were stirring under blankets, lifting head or arm, twitching a shoulder or a knee. The Mentasthenia was wearing off; the fifty thousand patients in the Centre were coming back to the world of reality from their dream world.

A scream rang through the length of the great room. Far off, a stark naked woman jumped from her bed and began to run down the aisle. Dark gouts of blood poured from her legs as she ran, and she screamed continually. Long

before she reached the group, she collapsed, a pitiful figure dying in the mess of her own blood.

Voices began to stir the shadows; there were muffled screams, sobs, and more and ever more movement. Dick guessed that the time for action had come, and he lifted Veronica from the bed, swinging her over his shoulder. Already the doctor was starting for the door, the nurse close behind, and Dick broke into a run. Veronica was moving on his shoulder—he thought he heard her sobbing—but he did not pause in his headlong flight from the vast room of death and madness. As he cleared the door, he heard behind him shrill cries, death cries, all the enormous travail of ten thousand people dying. And there were five floors beneath, each tight packed with patients!

When he got clear of the building, he laid Veronica upon the ground. She was breathing fast, her face dead white, her nostrils pinched. He would have given his life for a half-glass of some stimulant, but he had nothing and knew nowhere where he could lay hands on some. He glanced at his watch; it was two hours after midnight. Life was stirring in the town, though any sounds were masked by the cacophony of noise that came from the death house at his back. Somewhere a fire was burning, lighting the sky with a devilish red glow.

A car stood near him. He did not know or care whose it was, but putting Veronica in the back, he switched to automatic and let the motor cut in. In an instant they were on the beam, swinging out of the broad park and on to highway fifteen. Dick let her run on the automatic until they were clear of the town, and then took over, taking a side, non-beam road that led towards the forest. In the first parking lot he found, he stopped the car and went back to Veronica.

HE HARDLY dared hope that she would be alive; that she should escape madness would seem a miracle. Yet she lived, and as he held her in his arms, she stirred and her eyelids fluttered until the eyes were revealed, and they were undistended.

"Dick," she whispered. "What's happened, Dick? Those dreams, beautiful dreams and then . . . I was falling, falling . . . I was dying . . . Dick, what's happened?"

"You're safe, darling," he whispered. "Safe now. It's all over. No more dreams, no falling, no death. You're safe, my darling, and with me again."

"Dick, I'm frightened. Don't let me fall . . . if I fall again, I'm lost . . . hold me tight. . . ."

He held her tight in his arms, raining kisses on her white face, listening to her talking, thrilling when she became more coherent, noticed things about her, asked questions, until the sun came up in the east and the cloud masses broke, giving place to a greenish sky that deepened to the blue of another perfect day.

She dozed, and he left the car for a while to stretch his limbs. To the south he could see a dozen pillars of smoke climbing to the sky, evidence of the night of terror that had gripped Burnside, and for that matter the whole world. The frightful deed had been done, the power grid had been broken, and throughout the five continents people had died by the million in the Mentasthetic Centres, people had fought in the streets in a frenzy of fear as

they realised that the one dominating factor of civilisation had passed from their hands, and that their machines were powerless.

He drove the car back towards Burnside. The beam was dead, and he used manual control, swinging her off the main road when he saw the first houses, following a little used byway until he reached his own home. He carried Veronica to her bed as she dozed, and then he tried to prepare a meal, searching for twigs in the garden to light a fire.

By noon Veronica was sufficiently strong enough to drink some milk and eat the last egg in the 'fridge.

"What happened?" she pressed him.

He told her briefly, missing out as much as possible, merely telling of the decision to rejuvenate mankind by making the race struggle for existence. He told her of how he had rescued her from the Centre, but said nothing of the terrible state he had left there.

For a long time she was silent. When she finally spoke he was surprised at the clarity of her thinking.

"And the people at the Centre who did not escape?" she queried. "They all died?"

"The doctor saved a lot," he said quietly.

"Fifty, I suppose, in fifty thousand. Well, they deserved to die—just as I did."

Dick was shocked. "But there were many friends of yours there," he said.

"God knows why I ever went there, Dick. It seems worse than suicide, now. Yes, far worse, for suicide requires courage of a sort, and Mentasthenia requires nothing but boredom."

He attributed her *volte face* to the shock of the affair, yet he found even later that she expressed no regret that many millions should have died, and almost a sort of disgust at her own escape, as though she too should have been punished with the others for her lack of will-power.

When Henderson came for them that night, she was fully recovered, and she argued with him all the way to the settlement as to the best form of decentralised control that the settlements should exercise over uncivilised man. It was when they reached the settlement, and she took off her flying helmet that Dick realised that her hair was as white as snow.

"WHO'S that coming?" Henderson Junior asked suddenly, pointing to a lone figure crossing the valley towards them.

Dick stared for a moment and then exclaimed. "It's Higgs," he said. "He's the man we want, by jove! Let's go out and have a talk with him."

They ambushed Higgs as he climbed over a low wall to follow a path down the valley. For a moment he stared at Dick in amazement.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "Maybach in the flesh! I thought you were dead!"

Higgs was short and stocky, roughly dressed and his grizzled face showed no signs of welcome as he was introduced to Henderson.

"What are you doing around here, Maybach?" he said. "Where have you come from?"

"We've been hiding out in the forest," Dick said. "Got a hunting cabin towards the lake."

"I'd stay there," Higgs said grimly. "Your life isn't worth a cent around here."

"Why?"

"People know you were one of the gang who sabotaged the power-bank, and they don't like you. In fact, they'd blast you to Hades if they had a blaster; as it is, they'll probably hang you."

"And you?"

"I can't say I exactly love you, Maybach. You've made the end of my life a misery instead of a pleasure, and you killed my wife. She was at the Centre. But no doubt you had your reasons for your action."

"Did many survive at the Centre?" Henderson queried.

Higgs shook his head. "There are about forty or fifty whiteheads, I'd say, and about thirty lunatics. As for the rest, we cremated them when we burned the building down."

"Whiteheads?" Dick snapped. "What's that?"

Higgs made a face. "A queer thing happened when you chaps blasted the power grid. Some of the patients in the Centre seem to have had a mental jerk—a sort of acceleration of their mental processes. Also, their hair went white. We call them the 'whiteheads' because you have to be careful with them. They aren't normal."

"In what way?"

"They're cruel, and they think differently to the rest of us. They can tell you the answer almost before you ask the question. They can read your mind. They're horrible, and personally I think the sooner we kill them off, the better."

A lot of things were straightening themselves out in Dick's mind, and the resulting picture was not too attractive.

"Where are these—whiteheads?" he asked.

"Keep to themselves, mostly," Higgs replied. "Standoffish crew—not that anyone wants to mix with them. Seem to have some sort of spiritual communion with each other. Freaks, we'd have called them years back, but now, well, they make you react—like zombies would!"

HENDERSON cut in. "How's life in general though?" he asked. "I mean, how do you get along from day to day. We've been pretty cut off up in the hills."

Higgs looked at him. "Thanks to Maybach here, it's a hell of a life. No power, no petrol, damn all food and no heating. They tell me that Truville in the next county managed to get an old generator working on wood fuel, and that they've got power for three or four hours a day. Guess we haven't got round that far yet. We're still squabbling over food distribution and killing each other in petty squabbles."

"No organisation?"

"We've got the Burnside Vigilante Committee who keep order and beat off the bandits that try to raid the store houses or steal the women. That's about the limit of it."

"Got any weapons?"

"We've still got a few blasters charged, but they need servicing. Say, Maybach, you were a technician. If you want to get tolerated in this community, you could offer to do all that sort of servicing. The Lord knows we need technicians."

"What about these whiteheads. Couldn't they help?"

"Reckon they could if they turned their crazy minds to it, but they won't help and we won't ask the baskets. Matter of fact we're seriously considering liquidating the whole outfit."

"Good Lord !" Dick exclaimed. "What have they done to deserve that ?"

"If we don't bump them off, they'll bump us off. Honestly, Maybach, you've no idea how those blighters give themselves airs ! They know they're different, and they show it. They're cruel, too. None of the milk of human kindness about a whitehead. They and their perishing *reason* ! If their *reason* told them that the rest of mankind should be eliminated, they wouldn't stop to argue it out like we do."

"Have they a leader ?" Henderson asked.

"Not in the accepted sense of the word. There's a chap named Cooke lives over there beyond the gap in that old house where the Perrin's used to live. If they have a leader, I'd say it was him, though they're so darned independent I doubt if they'd own to a leader. They sort of gather around him of an evening."

COOKE was certainly a natural leader. He evoked in Dick the same response that Henderson Senior evoked, for he had a fine speaking voice and a commanding appearance, with his flowing white locks and big, powerful face.

"Come in !" he said, when Dick and young Henderson knocked at the door.

"I don't know what you want but I've got an idea."

'Intuition' would be a better word, Dick thought, with memories of his wife's habit of seeing things before anyone else.

The inside of the house was furnished in a makeshift sort of way, and the three men sat down in uncomfortable chairs.

"You're not from Burnside," Cooke said. "Maybe you come from the secret settlement in the forest."

"What makes you think that ?" Henderson asked.

"Your clothes have none of the wear that ours have, gentlemen. As for the settlements, why should the technicians have sabotaged the power grid if they did not intend to rejuvenate the world."

Henderson coughed. "Never mind where we come from," he said, and Cooke bowed his head with a slight, cynical smile twitching at his lips. "We understand that things are not too good for you whiteheads."

"That depends upon the meaning of not too good," Cooke said. "We live and eat and think—and plan. I presume you refer to the hostility of you—normals, if I may coin a word. We are not worried."

"But supposing the normals decide to eliminate your unfair competition ?"

"My dear young man. Have you never heard of the survival of the fittest ? We are ten times more fit than the normals to inherit the world. Look at you, with all your complexes of tradition, racial pride, personal vanity. You are so loaded down with considerations that you can't see the wood for the trees. I'll even go so far as to say that you two fought an immense mental battle before you agreed to play your part in sabotaging the power grid. Well, gentlemen, we're different. We see the trees, and then we see the wood as a whole. A small difference, but one that makes you normals a thing of the past."

"Tell me," Henderson said. "I can't exactly see what you're getting at."

"Simply, young man, that nature has taken another step forward. Hitherto you've thought in terms of physical evolution. Man was near-perfect, because he had a bigger brain than any animal, and therefore could use his other physical attributes as he wanted. 'Ah!', you said. 'The next step will be bigger and better brains', forgetting completely that the human *brain* in a physical way is wellnigh perfect—in fact, too perfect since we can cut off about nine-tenths of it and it still functions adequately. We, however, have advanced man in another direction. We can think four-dimensionally. We can look at a problem and all the clues fall into place *immediately* without any complex reasoning processes. We see question and answer at the same time. We are better than you because we have infinitely better minds. Now do you understand?"

"Can you read thoughts?" Dick asked.

"We can in a way. Every action is the result of a complex reasoning on the part of a normal man. Every one of his thoughts follows in a train. By virtue of our vastly superior *mental-sight* we can automatically deduce within reason just what a normal person is going to think or do. We are accused of reading other people's minds, but it is untrue. We look, listen, and see the answer in some thought or action."

THEY were silent for a long time until Cooke began talking again. "You were thinking," he said, "just what position we *mutants*—changed ones, if you like—are going to fill in the world. The answer is that the world is ours, and one day, the galaxy."

"Tell me some more," Henderson said, and his attitude had changed considerably. "Why have you not built power plants? Why have you no hellicops, gliders, jet ships?"

"You must give us time," Cooke answered. "We are busy learning at the moment. Every day two or three of us go to the power-bank out there and study the burnt-out motor. Most of it was fused into a lump, and it's the Devil's own job, even for us, to try to reason out how the thing worked. It is the same with the flying machines. We have to start at the beginning with our reasoning, and try to follow the complicated processes of the machine. But we shall succeed despite all the hostility of the normals."

"You know they propose to liquidate you?" Dick asked.

Cooke laughed. "Oh, we shall be persecuted all right. But we shall win through. We are not alone; there are small colonies of us established throughout the world, and some of us will survive. Then one day we shall surplant the normals and the world will be a better place to live in. Look at those morons in Burnside, with all their petty squabbling, their murders, their vigilantes. Why don't they organise and wipe out every bandit within a hundred mile radius? They could do it in a week, even with their limited resources. But no, they're weighed down with tradition, family pride, all that sentimental nonsense."

"The only people they reckon on wiping out are you whiteheads," Henderson said grimly.

"Can the horsefly wipe out the elephant?"

"No, but don't forget that there are a lot more horseflies than elephants."

"I know. I have no illusions. A lot of us may die and the rest will be forced into the forests. But some of us will live on to bring the good things

back to life."

"A queer cuss," Henderson said as they made their way back to Dick's burnt-out house.

"Veronica's one of them !" Dick said suddenly. "You know that, Junior ? A whitehead ?"

"Yes, Dick, but don't let that worry you."

"It doesn't, but it solves a lot of problems. I never could understand that 'intuition' of hers. And her habit of putting words into my mouth, and her strange clear thinking amounting almost to—cruelty. But now I can see it all. Perhaps she doesn't know herself yet. I suppose without others to talk it over with she must have difficulty in analysing her own mental state. When we were saying goodbye she said she had a strange feeling that she ought to make contact with some invisible army. I didn't understand then, and I don't think she did either, but now I can see it. It's this spiritual union of theirs, the strange, ethereal bond that ties them together."

"There are a lot of things, Dick, that have got to be worked out sooner or later. Obviously these mutants are going to have difficulty in fitting into the scheme of things. Right now I can't see the answer."

DUSK was falling when they reached the house. Higgs had invited them over for the evening, and to stay if they liked, and he had promised them he would not betray them to others who thirsted after Dick's blood in revenge for the part he had played in the blackout.

Higgs welcomed them. He told them he was lonely, and that most of his contemporaries were dead or dying, and that their company for an evening would be a godsend. He had cooked a soup of rabbit and vegetables, and he had certainly learned to cook, for they enjoyed it immensely. After the meal, Henderson produced some cigars (brought by jet ship from Carlos Settlement) and they had a quiet smoke.

"Why don't you co-operate with the whiteheads ?" Henderson asked. "They could help a lot, you know."

"They don't want our help, and we don't want theirs. They'd kill us quick enough if they had the chance."

"But why not use them ? After all, with your help and their four-dimensional way of thinking, you might get things going again."

"Bah ! Superior bastards ! They're on their own, they are ! But we're going to even things up !" Higgs leaned forward and spoke confidentially. "I've got it on reliable information, that those beggars are making camps in the woods, getting together into their beastly cliques. Well, we're going to act ! Eight days from now, we're going to bust the whiteheads right open—kill them all, men, women and kids."

"Kids ?"

"Ay ! It seems incredible, but some of those women have spawned already. Seems that gestation has been shortened in them. And the nippers are different ! Make no mistake. We've got to do for the lot of them, or they'll breed and spread until they're strong enough to wipe us all out."

"And when have you planned the pogrom for ?"

"The eighth night from now. It's all arranged. We've made our plans, got the weapons, marked down the hiding places of the beggars, and we'll make no mistakes !"

"I think you're wrong," Henderson said.

"Would you nurse a snake, man? It's us or them, and we're going to get the first blow in. What's more, there are a lot of other towns who are going to strike too. We don't get much information from outside, but we've heard by roundabout ways that within ten days the whole continent will destroy its whiteheads!" He gripped Henderson's arm. "Would you like to come in with us?" he cried, a strange fury in his eyes.

III

"I PUT it to you, gentlemen," Henderson said, shaking his old head with emotion. "Our duty towards the future of the human race is to throw open the settlements to these mutants. We must act quickly and decisively!"

"I don't like it!" Ivanov declared. "Henderson, I don't like it. How do we know these mutants are the next step? They may be a step backwards, even a step sideways into unknown ways. My report states that they are a cruel people."

"Cruel by our standards, Ivanov, but necessarily cruel by Nature's standards? Surely they are only more clear-visioned than we are. In a world of mutants, the apparently cruel will cease to be apparent."

"We need time," Bartok broke in. "This cannot be decided in a moment. It is a matter for all the people of the settlement to decide, and we must discuss it with them."

"There is no time for discussion!" Henderson said sharply. "Their existence is at stake. Reports from all over the world agree that the normals are going to murder them almost immediately. To us it may seem a coincidence, but if we knew more of natural laws we might be able to understand why this world-wide movement seems to come to a head at the same time in all communities."

"I'm for taking them in!" Sebastian from Carlos declared. "Our duty to the future is clear. These mutants are the forerunners of the new race, and we must offer them our protection."

Three other settlement leaders nodded assent. "Quite clear," one said. "It is deferred suicide for we poor normals, but the path is obvious, and we must tread it!"

"I shall abide by a majority vote," Ivanov declared. "But I'm against it. If these people are the natural successors to *homo sapiens*, then they will survive by their very fitness to survive. If they are merely freaks, then they will go under."

Henderson puffed savagely at his pipe. "Quite!" he snapped. The last six months had done nothing to improve his patience. "But if they are *not* the new master race, they will die out in the settlements just as effectively as they will if they're hunted in the forests. And if they *are* the new race, then they will start at a tremendous disadvantage if their thoughts are diverted continually to combat against reaction. Let us take them in, combine our old knowledge with their new reasoning, and tomorrow we shall be lords of the Galaxy."

"We?" Bartok said cynically. "We shall be nothing of the sort. They'll suck us dry of knowledge, and then dispose of us in concentration camps."

"If that's to be our fate, I shall rest contented if I think I've helped mankind forward," Henderson said.

"Maybe for you," Ivanov said. "But you're an old man. I've two hundred young people in my settlement, bursting themselves with an ambition to blaze new paths through the universe. How are they going to take to these mutants who may turn out to be devils in disguise?"

"DICK," Veronica said. She sat cosily upon his lap before the soft glow of the heater. "Dick, how many of these—these *whiteheads*—were there?"

"About forty or fifty Higgs said. This chap Cooke seems to be their leader."

"I do wish I'd come. I told you I knew I *ought* to come Dick, and now I know why."

Dick laughed, a shade uncomfortably. "I wish you wouldn't keep harping on these mutants," he said. "Can't we talk about anything else?"

"But Dick, darling. They're my people. I must know all about them."

"But darling, we're all the same people, only they see things four dimensionally."

"You don't like us, do you Dick?"

"Us?"

"Please, Dick, look things straight in the face. I don't like the expression, but there it is. I'm a whitehead as much as Cooke is."

"But darling, we mustn't let that make any difference. It hasn't yet, has it?"

And yet it had. Dick knew in his heart that the relationship between Veronica and himself had changed completely. During the last six months they had been drifting apart, even though Veronica had no real idea of her new powers. Since he had returned with the story of the mutants, the drift had become a race. There was no question now that they could ever be lovers again, that the mystical bond between them, for so long strained to breaking point, had now broken and nothing could repair it.

"Dick, what are they going to do about the—whiteheads?"

"How in blazes should I know?"

"But you made your report to Henderson."

"Any decision he makes must be based on the voice of the dozen settlements."

"And do you think the settlements will take them in? It will be marvellous if they do. I told you there was something missing, Dick. Well, now I know what it is!"

He nodded gloomily.

"Dick, do go down to Henderson's bungalow and see if the meeting's broken up yet. I swear that if they don't open the settlement to the whiteheads, I'll set out on foot through the forest to make contact."

"SO IT is agreed?" Henderson asked. "All settlements agree to take in as many mutants as they can find?"

"I bow to the majority," Ivanov said. "But everything tells me we're wrong."

"I agree too," Bartok muttered. "But like Ivanov it is only because the majority say so."

"And we do it at once?" Henderson said. "For this settlement, I propose to act immediately. According to the information in the report, we have only thirty-six hours left before the pogrom in this part of the continent begins."

"We shall do our best," said the other leaders.

"Well, gentlemen, that is all. Personally, I think we're doing the right thing. These mutants will carry our banners to the peaks; but they must have our backs to climb on at the beginning."

"So long as they don't break our backs," Sebastian said ruefully.

DAWN was tinging the eastern sky. "Are you clear?" Henderson Senior asked.

His son laughed. "Quite clear," he answered. "God knows you've gone over it enough times. We're to collect as many mutants as we can at the long valley by midnight tonight. We're to blast our way into and out of the hornets nest, and contrary to our previous orders, we're to come back with the mutants at whatever the cost!"

"Good. I'll have our three jet ships in the long valley at five minutes to midnight. They'll put down as near the beacon as they can. You must marshal the mutants in three bodies."

"And my wife?" Dick asked.

"She'll be extremely useful to you. I've an idea that the whiteheads may prove suspicious of your motives. Your wife will break down the barrier, and should act as a sort of interpreter for you."

"And if they won't come?" his son queried.

"If they won't come freely, bring them by force. At the least we want a dozen, at the most the whole bunch."

"I'd hate to have to lord it over them with a blaster!" Junior cracked. "With their reason, they'd trick it out of my hands in two shakes."

"I'll get my wife, then," Dick said. "And then we'll take off. I wish we had a jet ship instead of this old helicop."

"There must be no jet ships near Burnside until zero," Henderson said emphatically. "We don't want to precipitate matters. That old helicop may be slow, but she's silent and trustworthy. Now get moving."

Dick had already warned Veronica of the journey, and when he got to the cabin she was ready, dressed in slacks and a lumber jacket, her hair hidden in a close-fitting helmet. Her eyes were bright with her inner excitement.

"All ready?" she cried when her husband came into the cabin. "Let's get off as quick as possible, Dick."

He gripped her arm. "One thing, Veronica," he said. "There may be trouble."

"There won't," she said gaily. "I'll persuade Cooke to bring everyone peacefully. Don't you worry."

"Listen!" he said grimly. "I've none of your optimism—and neither has the Chief. If there's trouble, darling, I want you to promise you'll come back with me. Promise?"

"Why should I?" she said laughingly. "It's a silly thing to promise. Of course I'll come back."

"But will you? Once you've met some of these people, once you've made contact with them, you may want to stay with them rather than return. That's why I want your solemn promise that if there's any question of choice, you'll choose to come back, and not stay with them."

"Couldn't I stay a week?" she said jokingly.

"If you stay an hour, you'll probably be killed. If you survive, you'll be

hunted like a wild animal through the woods. You'll live hardly, fighting for your very existence, with death at your elbow, and no hope of a secure future. That's why you must promise before we leave this cabin. Promise by everything you hold sacred that you'll come back whatever happens !"

"I promise, Dick, but it's quite unnecessary. I *know* what's going to happen. Don't asked me why, but I know. I can't see the future, but I can resolve the plans and the information into a pretty certain prophecy, and I know the whiteheads will come. It's my sacred intuition."

The mention of her intuition made him shudder. The word had come to mean so much more than it had ten days before. Now it was the magic symbol that stood for her new relationship with the other mutants, their spiritual one-ness, their strange unity. He was frightened that this bond would grow until it choked even her amused tolerance of him, and that when she came into actual contact with the others, he would no longer exist in her world. Already he hated, and feared, the others.

IV

"WE'LL come !" Cooke said briefly. "But we'll have to act fast if what you say is true. We're a scattered community."

"How soon can you assemble ?" Henderson Junior asked.

Cooke shrugged his shoulder. "I wouldn't like to commit myself," he said. "But we should start at once."

"Let us have the locations of the others," Veronica urged. "Then we could split up and get to work."

"I don't know the district," Junior said. "I'd be useless."

"We can form three groups," Cooke said. "Maybach and you go in one direction, I in another, and Veronica in a third."

"My wife stays with me !" Dick said emphatically.

Cooke raised his eyebrows. "Why ?" he snapped.

"It's going to be dangerous."

"She can look after herself."

"She's a woman."

"I can look after myself," Veronica said. "Better, for that matter, than you or Junior, Dick."

Cooke leapt to his feet. "Well," he said. "Let's start. Now this is where the others *should* be." He began to sketch out the locations of the remainder of the mutants.

Dick was a smouldering volcano. His views had been over-ridden with such contempt that he was on the point of erupting into violent protest when Junior gripped his arm.

"They're right !" he whispered. "Steady, old man."

That was the trouble. Cooke and Veronica *were* right; their minds had stripped the problem of its mists of sentiment, and had at once cut the knot at the centre. He, as her husband, naturally assumed that she needed protection, though in his heart he knew she did not require it at all, and that if a crisis arose, she would be far better suited to face it than he.

Cooke handed him a pencilled list. It carried twelve names, one or two of which he recognised, and locations stretching westwards ending at the power-bank, where, he was informed, two of the whiteheads would be found analysing the shattered motors and controls. For a moment Dick wondered

whether he should insist upon Veronica accompanying him, but before he could reach a decision, Henderson was propelling him towards the door.

THE sun had passed the meridian, and there were clouds to the west. They had no difficulty in locating the first three names on their list; two were men and the third a woman, and all agreed to be at the rendezvous at sundown. Henderson was taking no chances, and wanted to avoid any danger of a running fight.

On the way to the fourth location, they met Higgs, who glanced with interest at the slung blasters they carried.

"So you've come back for the massacre!" he said grimly. "We're starting at sundown."

They got away from him with difficulty, for Higgs seemed to have nothing to do and was ready for conversation.

"He's pretty free with information!" Dick commented when they were out of earshot.

"It's unthinkable that any normal should wish to betray the normals to the whiteheads!" Henderson said. "Where's the next place?"

By four o'clock they had seen eight of the names on their list, and had scored seven successes. It was then that they ran into trouble. Leaping a low wall to cross to a long house lying against a hill, they bumped right into a group of four men.

"Dick Maybach!" a gaunt, middle-aged man cried. "God damn it, I've longed for a chance to level up with you, you murderer!" He started to unship a stubby blaster from his shoulder.

Henderson was quicker, and in a second the man was covered and the others backed away uneasily.

"Drop that blaster!" Henderson snarled.

The man dropped it with a curse. "We'll get you, Maybach," he snarled. "You may be mad, but I'll get you one day. You murdered my wife and daughter!"

"What the hell are we going to do with these boys?" Henderson queried. "We can't just blast them."

"Maybach could!" the gaunt man snapped. "He murdered fifty thousand innocent people—what's four more!"

"We'll take their weapons, Dick," Henderson said, ignoring the outburst. "We'll watch them as we move off and blast them if they move."

"Leave the blasters," the gaunt man pleaded, his passion gone. "We need them."

"What for?" Henderson rapped.

"We've got business for them tonight. Let us have them, mister. I promise we'll leave them on the ground until you're out of sight, and we won't come after you. I'll settle up with Maybach one day, but it won't be today. I've bigger game to hunt!"

"What game?"

"Whiteheads, the bastards."

Henderson picked up the blaster on the ground, and Dick gathered the only other. They ignored the pleas of the gaunt man and marched off up the hill, barely pausing to look back. When they did, they saw the four men walking away steadily in the other direction.

"We've only got another two hours of daylight," Henderson said. "We'd better get on fast."

Their luck still held, for they found the next five mutants where they were expected, and as the shadows lengthened, they kept on hopefully.

"I hope you can find your way about here in the dark, Dick?" Henderson said. "I reckon we'll have about six miles to cover to the long valley."

"Don't worry," Dick answered. "I know this district like the back of my hand. Say, what's that?"

Ahead of them, smoke pillared slowly into the still air.

"My guess is we're too late!" Henderson said. "There should be two at the next place, but I reckon the normals got there first!"

They advanced warily, and their caution was rewarded, for as they stared from the edge of a plantation, they saw half a dozen drunken figures pirouetting grotesquely about a burning house. Dangling from an oak tree in the garden were two twitching bodies.

"Come on!" Henderson said hastily. "We've got to move mighty fast."

THEY were ahead of the normals at the next location, and sent a whitehead off quickly in the direction of the rendezvous. That left only the two whiteheads who had gone to the power-bank.

Dick and Henderson covered the half mile to the domed white building at a jog trot, and again approached warily. But no one seemed to be about, and in the growing darkness they walked across the helicop park and through the half-opened bronzed doors.

"Hi there!" Henderson called. "Vincent and Peski? Are you there?"

A man emerged from the shadows. "Who calls?" he said.

"Is the other guy with you?"

"Sure. Peski! Visitors!"

Quickly Henderson explained the situation to the two mutants. They grasped the matter at once.

"A pity!" Peski said. "I'd just grasped the layout of that automatic box set in the main feeder circuit. Another couple of days and we'd have the whole secret of the Maybach power build-up!"

"You'll get plenty of chance for that when you get to the settlement!" Junior snapped. "Come on!"

They reached the door, and then Dick drew back suddenly. "History repeats itself!" he said. "Remember, Henderson, how we defended this place while I blew up the plant? Well, it looks like we've got to it again!"

There were dark shadows crossing the park, dark shadows that moved silently and purposefully. Quickly Henderson handed the two captured blasters to the two mutants.

"Come out, you perishers!" a voice shouted. "Come out now and see who's master here!"

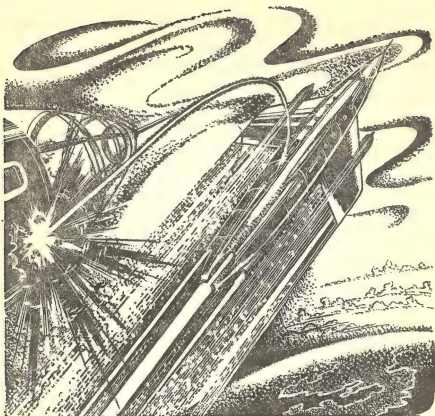
No one came out, and the shadows advanced closer.

"Come out and take your medicine!" the voice bawled. "Come out—or we'll come in and get you, and it won't be pleasant!"

"Let's kill them!" Peski whispered. "They're useless animals."

"No!" Henderson said firmly. "No killing unless it's forced on us!"

Two men materialised out of the shadows and stepped to the door. One carried a rope, the other a blaster.



"Drop that blaster!" Henderson rasped. "Quick, before I give you a bellyfull!"

For a moment the two men recoiled, surprised at the show of resistance. Then they came on.

"We know you've got no weapons!" the voice snarled. "Stop bluffing, and come out!"

Henderson sighed, and then squeezed the button on the blaster. A ray packet seared across the space of a few yards, and in a moment the armed man was no more than charred flesh into which the fused metal of the blaster he had carried, was pressed. The other man did not stay, but started to run across the park.

"I'll get him!" Peski snapped, but again Henderson restrained him.

"He may seem a useless animal to you," he said, "but he's a man to me. Let him go."

THEY left the white building and began to move in single file along the shadows of the wall, holding their breaths as they passed the still smouldering flesh of the man. They had made about a dozen yards when they heard a yell, and then a ray packet whipped across the park at the speed of light, striking high and to the left, turning the white marble into a fountain of

sparks. At once they began to run, still clinging to the wall and not firing back lest they should disclose accurately their position.

There was another cry and then several voices began to shout and feet thud on the tarmac. The blaster spat again, blindly, and a tree burst magically into a pyramid of flame. By its bright glow there was no longer shadow, but the four fugitives had the start they needed, and were among the bushes of the hilltop. Dick led at a run, with the two mutants in the centre and Henderson bringing up the rear, holding his fire. By the light of the burning tree he measured the lynching party at ten or twelve males and several females. He counted two or three blasters and any number of bill-hooks and shot guns.

Again a blaster belched its ray packet and a ten yard square of brush began to burn, but Dick and his party were well to the right and gaining on their slower pursuers. With six miles to cover and four hours to zero, they had plenty of time, but with one lynching party not far from their heels, they did not propose to loiter. Dick did not hesitate, leading his party unerringly through the enclosed country, taking cuts through walled gardens, fording streams, skirting woods. It seemed as though they had shaken off their pursuers, though several times they thought they heard yells a long way behind them.

"Our luck's holding!" Henderson panted. "less we bump another gang!"

He should have crossed his fingers when he spoke, for a second later he stumbled and fell, and as he went down, the back of his hand pressed the button of his blaster. It was lucky inasmuch as the packet hit no one in the party, but it was unlucky for the packet struck a tree and in a moment there was a pillar of flame beaconing their path.

"That's torn it!" he cried. "Sorry, chaps!"

Dick broke into a jog trot, flogging his aching limbs to new efforts. Vincent and Peski followed behind, cursing, and Henderson jumped to his feet, swore obscenely at the tree, and began to catch up.

The tree acted as a rallying point not only for the original band of ruffians, but for another party (presumed to be the one Dick had seen a little earlier, hanging the two mutants), for they heard the crashing of feet through undergrowth on their right as they lay hidden in a patch of thick scrub.

"That's really torn it!" Henderson said again. "That'll double their strength!"

Peski got to his feet. "Vincent and I will stay here and hold them off!" he said grimly. "If you've warned ten others, that'll suffice. We stay here; you two beat it. You deserve life for your efforts!"

Dick boiled over at the magnanimity. "Damn you!" he yelled. "We're taking you both back with us. If we didn't intend to do so, we'd never have stuck our necks out!"

"We're taking you," Henderson said quietly but firmly. "Trouble like this was was expected, and our orders were explicit on the point. Now come on, all of you!"

Peski glanced at Vincent, shrugged his narrow shoulders in an expressive gesture, and turned to follow. Dick paused for a moment longer, fighting down the rage inside him before he too joined the others.

THEY made good speed again, and soon had covered half the distance. There was no sign of pursuit behind them, and they rested a while sitting by the side of a metalled road.

THE DAWN BREAKS RED

"Another three miles!" Dick said. "How goes the time?"

"Two hours to zero," Henderson answered. "We'll do it all right!"

"Yes. I hope . . . what's that?"

It was a patch of flame some distance off, a glowing point that became a beacon and then an area of flame.

"That's Prendergast's place!" Vincent said. "I can see the white temple he had in his garden. Too bad!"

Dick shivered. Prendergast had been a name on their list, a location at which the mutant had been absent. Prendergast had paid for his supernormality and his absence, and brought the total to three whiteheads who would not reach safety.

"We'd better get moving!" Henderson said grimly.

Below them they heard movements, shouting and the flashes of torches. The pursuit had commenced again!

And now, when they thought themselves safest, the four met their greatest danger, for the number of the hunters had doubled and trebled, and the taste of blood had increased the intensity of their lust. The pursuit streamed up the hillside, occasionally setting alight a clump of trees with blaster packets to enable them to seek out evidence of the passage of the hunted men.

Reaching the top of the hill a thousand yards ahead of the advancing line, Henderson called a halt. Dick explained that the long valley was a half mile to their right front, and that if they closed in before the jet ships landed, there would be a grave danger of the whole operation being hazarded.

"Right!" Henderson snapped. "Now let's give these murderous swine a dose of their own medicine. Fan out behind the rocks and pick the beggars off. With that blaze behind them they'll be perfect targets!"

Dick saw a crouching figure running up the hillside, a black marionette rather than a man. He sighted at three hundred yards, allowing for lateral movement, and leisurely waited for the range to close. The dancing doll came on, waving its arms, beckoning on the others, pausing to shout. Dick sighed, and snapped the button, feeling the ray projector sink back into the recuperator, following the faint blue line of the packet as it curved gracefully across space. The marionette gave one last, violent jerk, threw back its arms, and fell, smoke momentarily blotting out vision as the corpse smouldered.

To his right, Henderson cut loose with his blaster, searing a body and turning a boulder into a mess of fused silicon. Below, there were wild screams, curses, and in a moment or two, intersecting rays of blasters, seeking out targets in the darkness above. Dick watched carefully, following the orbit of a blaster packet, tracing it to its source. He stabbed at the source, saw brush flame, and a dark figure dashing wildly away. He buttoned again, dead on his target, charring body and metal in a timeless second.

The mob withdrew behind the fires to rally and plan. Dick slipped the catch and allowed the coils to slack off, feeling the pleasant heat chase away the cold of the night.

The respite was not for long. "Watch right!" Henderson cried, and Peski cut loose, setting scrub alight on a spur three hundred yards to their right.

"There they are!" Dick yelled, jerking ray packets into the little group of black shapes that scattered wildly away from the flames. He grunted with satisfaction when he saw a figure stumble and fall; winged, if not dead, he thought.

But the attackers had their blood up, and some new leader had taken advantage of the respite to reconnoitre the position. He had sensed the narrow re-entrant beyond the spur, and pressed his attack there. Henderson spotted the danger, and sent Vincent to put the cork in the bottle.

OF THAT little, private fight beyond the spur Dick never learned the details. From his position he saw flame, heard screams, and then, in a moment, the hill-top was ablaze. A ray packet glimmered faintly towards the stars as a blaster went off by accident. There was more blaster play until it seemed the whole crest of the hill was alight, and then vociferous cheers that could mean but one thing. The mob had reached the summit, and Vincent had died.

But, at this late hour, a new factor intervened. To the south, they heard a familiar noise, a steady roar that grew in intensity. There were comets in the sky, comets with angry red tails that curved as jet ships answered to tubes, swung in a circle as they picked up the signal from the beacon Henderson had planted in long valley.

"The ships !" Henderson cried. "About time too ! Lead us to it, Dickie boy !"

"O.K. Junior. Follow me !"

They slipped away into the trees, feeling firm turf under their feet. Dick broke into a run, following an old track through the pinewood, treading downwards as they followed the way to the valley.

It took ten minutes to reach the clearing, and the ships were down and loading by the time they got there. Behind them, they heard the noise of the pursuit. The mob had seen the ships, too, and like bees, they began to close in on the landing ground.

"Hi, there !" Henderson challenged. "Everything O.K.?"

"O.K." It was Cooke, standing by the entry port of the third jet ship. "Casualties ?"

"Vincent was killed five minutes back. Did you get the nine we sent back ?"

"Eight got here. Have you got Peski ?"

"I'm here, Cooke," Peski reported.

"Get aboard then," Henderson ordered. "There go the others !"

Bow jets were searing the sward of the valley, lifting the small ships to a take-off angle. As Dick clambered through the entry port, he heard the steady throb of power jerking to the main jets.

"My wife ?" Dick cried.

"She's over in No. 1," Cooke said.

Henderson slammed the port and turned the wheel. At once the red light glowed over the control table, and the pilot fed power to the bow tubes. The ship began to angle, catching Dick off his balance and throwing him to the floor. Power went to the main drive as the pilot pulled the controls and turned the rheostat. Slowly she lifted, her head clear of the ground and then her tail. Acceleration built up as the drive mounted, and another man-made comet leapt into the sky.

V

"I'M beaten," the old man whispered, slumping back in his chair as though the beating had been a physical one. "I can't fight on any more !"

"But this settlement is with you, sir, and there are five or six others solidly behind you," Dick said.

"But the split is there—the split that I've fought so long to avoid. If the settlements break up, humanity is finished."

Dick lit another cigarette nervously. "What can we do?" he asked.

Henderson Senior passed his hands over his grey hair. "We must protect our mutants!" he said emphatically. "In them lies the hope of the future. Whatever the action of the other settlements, we must protect ours."

"There's a lot of feeling against them!" Junior said. "They won't be easy to protect."

"They *must* be protected—at the cost of our lives maybe. But the nucleus here must survive the coming storm."

"Have you any idea of the nature of the storm?" Dick queried.

"Ask my son," the old man whispered.

"After the conference," Junior said, "the leaders from the other settlements went back. Four were determined on extermination of the mutants, two undecided, and six are like us. My father at once began to organise, and we have agents in the four settlements that plan murder, and those agents will give us advice of action planned or undertaken."

"How long. . .?"

"Soon! Too damn soon. We'd bring the mutants here if there were time, but there isn't."

Dick thought it over. He knew of the feeling in Henderson settlement among the normals, the growing resentment of the super-normals, their gradual infringement of other's spheres. Their aid to the progress of the establishment had been enormous. Designs for the power bank had been completed six months ahead of schedule and what was more, Peski and Cooke, confronted with Dick's work, had at once produced blueprints of new improvements that made the motors of the pre-blackout period compare with internal combustion engines. There was no doubt of the value of the mutants. Neither was there any doubt as to their growing power.

They had been segregated in a hastily run-up camp half a mile from the settlement centre. They had welcomed the segregation, for they mixed little with the normals except in the working hours. They were industrious, inspired with an almost mystical belief in the destiny of mankind, and they co-operated to the full in the planned work of the settlement. But the co-operation of the normals had decreased rapidly as man after man had seen his work of a year done in a month by a mutant, his pet plans laughed to scorn as infinitely superior lay-outs sprang from the fertile brains of the whiteheads.

There was a definite feeling of antagonism growing among the normals against the mutants. True, it had not yet reached the limit of demanding their liquidation, for Henderson's influence was too great, and the normals recognised their masters, even though they had begun to hate them.

HENDERSON still maintained a precarious hold on both normal and mutant. Cooke, the accepted leader of the thirty-five mutants, had bowed to the orders of the settlement leader. There was as much a bond between the two men as there could ever be between normal and super-normal. Yet, with Henderson's passing, an event that could not be delayed much longer,

everyone knew that Cooke would accept orders from no other, and Henderson Junior would be unable to take the reins from his dead father's hands.

"How much do the mutants know?" Dick asked.

"They should know nothing," Junior said. "But they have peculiar ways of finding things out, and my guess is that they know exactly what is happening."

"Do you think they'll cause trouble?"

Junior shrugged. "Maybe. They know how to use blasters if they can get hold of them. Some of them can fly heliops, and I know for a fact that they've established radio communication with other settlements. Soon they'll teach pilots to handle the jet ships, and then there'll be nothing left that they can't handle."

"They've no jet ship pilots?" Dick asked, surprised.

"Not yet. But I watched Cooke on the night we brought him here. My guess is that he picked up enough in that head of his to be able to fly one if the occasion demanded. Yes, sir, there isn't much those confounded whiteheads don't know now!"

Dick was torn, for he hated the mutants more, perhaps, than any man or woman in the settlement, yet he had been so close an associate of the old man that his being was permeated with the doctrine that the mutants must survive. He hated them because of Veronica; there could be not the slightest doubt that he had lost her—not that she was unfaithful, but simply that the very last ties between them had snapped the moment the mutants entered the camp. She was rarely at home now, and her intuition was no longer at his elbow. She had done everything but move to the mutant camp. True she still slept in the cabin, and took her morning and evening meals there, but for the rest of her time she was in the company of her fellow whiteheads. Dick could not blame her, preferring to look upon the other mutants as the ones to be blamed rather than his wife.

Only the previous evening, in despair, he had begged Veronica to try to go back to the old relationship, though inwardly he knew it was impossible.

"Dick," she had answered. "There is no way back to the world before the blackout. It was your action that changed me to what I am. No one can undo your work."

"But, darling," he pleaded, "can't we find some way of loving each other? Can't we bridge the gulf?"

She looked at him with an amused glance that both hurt him and roused his anger.

"We can never understand each other again," she said. "We live in different dimensions. Any contact other than purely physical contact is impossible."

He knew she spoke the truth. They could still sleep together, in fact Veronica had not changed in that respect, yet Dick loathed the physical relationship, devoid as it was of any spiritual contact. Rather than endure it, he had thought of a dozen excuses.

"You know how the whiteheads are hated," he said defensively. "Do they realise their danger?"

She tossed her head scornfully. "There is no danger that they cannot surmount," she said. "Dick, you've got to understand that the normals play the ape to the mutants' man. True the ape can catch and kill a man, but the apes as a whole never killed off *homo sapiens*. By the same rule we shall survive after *homo sapiens* is a thing of the past."

He knew it, and yet he feared for her. Henderson had crystallised the thoughts running about in his head for months. Sooner or later, the normals were going to eliminate the super-normals. In one strange way, the mutants were like children; they seemed unable to come down off their lofty pinnacles and stare the actual dangers in the face. They put their faith in natural laws, forgetting that they had not suffered a long, slow evolutionary process, but had made their step in a night. The battle between man and superman was to be no long drawn-out struggle of thousands of years' duration, but a bloody business of hours. To Dick it seemed a goodish chance that the normals might well succeed in their plan for the utter elimination of the mutants.

HE slept little that night, torn as he was between his love for Veronica and his hatred of the others. When at last he dropped into an uneasy slumber, he dreamed of whiteheads, horrid, distorted whiteheads clustering about him, choking the very life out of him by their presence. He seemed to have been asleep for little more than an hour when he was shaken by a rough hand into awareness.

"Maybach !" a voice grated. "Get dressed !"

He stared into the grey light of the dawn, and recognised Peski standing by the bed, a blaster in his hands. There was no sign of Veronica.

"What in blazes . . ." he began."

"Cut it out, Maybach. Just get your clothes on and come with me to the Chief's bungalow !"

Dick saw the steady way the blaster was held, and decided to argue later. He slipped into slacks, shirt and a leather jacket, and at Peski's side, followed the path down the hill. The settlement was ablaze with lights, and the door of Henderson's bungalow stood open. Inside stood Cooke, the two Hendersons, and another mutant.

"That Maybach ?" Cooke snapped. "Good, that's the lot. Sit down, gentlemen !"

They sat down, still dazed by the surprising turn of events. Cooke seated himself on the corner of Henderson's massive desk.

"A bit early in the morning," he said affably, "but all the best *coups de grâce* take place before dawn. Gentlemen, in our own interests and in the interest of the future of mankind, we, the mutants, have taken over control of the settlement."

"The only thing," Henderson Senior said quietly.

"You're crazy !" Junior snarled.

"Dangerous swine !" Dick grated.

Cooke continued to smile. "Naturally we do not expect you to take to it kindly," he said. "But we hope that once you have got used to our new position, things will return to—er—normal. The decision could not be postponed any longer; the danger was too great. In all twelve settlements, the mutants have, by now, taken control."

"What do you want with us ?" Henderson growled.

"We consider that you three are the most influential normals in the settlement. We want you, therefore, to co-operate with us; if you do, the rest will follow."

"Will they Hell !" Junior laughed. "You're not as popular as you imagine."

"We know how you feel about us, how you resent our—superior mental

powers," Cooke said quietly. "But if mankind is to achieve its destiny, we must work together. That's why we rely on you three to set the pace."

"FOR myself," Henderson Senior said slowly, "I will co-operate. But since I am no longer leader here, I cannot answer for any other single person in this settlement."

"Thank you," Cooke replied. "I need your help more than the help of my own people. Now the others?"

"Count me out!" Junior said. "All I want is to get into the forest. I'd rather take my chance with the animals than sit around here with you chaps in command."

"And you?" Cooke asked, looking at the Dick.

Dick shook his head slowly. "I don't know," he whispered. "I cannot answer until I've thought it out."

Cooke's answer was to send Veronica to him.

"You've no choice, Dick," she said. "For the same reason that you destroyed the power grid, you will stay and help us."

"Us?" he cried. "Us! So you are now completely one of them?"

"Yes," she said. "I am one of them."

"Then I cannot stay," he said. "If I thought that there was even the remotest likelihood that you were still my wife, I would swallow my pride and bow my head. As it is, I can only let my hatred of your people influence me. I shall go with Junior into the forest."

"I thought there was something more in you than human passions," she said. "But I was wrong. I can see now why you sabotaged the power bank. You did it because of me, not because you cared two pins for the destiny of the race. Henderson was different. He can see the real issues, he's sufficiently civilised to see the future without reference to his own passions. Go into the forest, Dick. Fight with the other animals, endure rather than live, survive by the strength of your arm and the keenness of your eye. One day, overhead, you'll see the first space ship leave earth for the planets. Look hard, Dick, and wonder, if you can, how you might have helped. Goodbye."

She was gone before he could answer. Bitterly, sorrowfully, full of pity for himself, he went back to Henderson's bungalow to find Junior and plan their escape to the forest. He found turmoil.

COOKE and Peski stood above old Henderson, who slumped in a chair, despair written across his fine face.

"Oh God, what can we do?" Cooke cried. "All this, and then—destruction. Is there no human being in all the settlement who can see into the future?"

"It's of your own making," Junior said cynically. "Go on, wondermen. Take up the jet ship if you can."

"What's happened?" Dick asked him, momentarily forgetting his self-pity.

Junior laughed. "The supermen are in a spot!" he cracked. "Seems they've seized control of every settlement except Sheba's Well. They've got Sheba's Well now, too, but they're too late."

"Why?"

"Because Hartnung's loaded a jet ship with atomic bombs and is on his

way to destroy every settlement. He's got twelve bombs aboard, and he reckons to do in twelve settlements. Carlos' has already gone west ! It'll be Topeja next, and then us, Dickie, so prepare to meet thy end !"

"How do you know all this ?"

"The ether's been buzzing for the last hour. The trouble is that it seems none of these supermen can fly a jet ship, least of all fight one, and their pals in other settlements won't get there in time, even if they can fly, which I doubt. Hartnung's got a straight run through."

"I see," Dick said slowly. "So we're to fight their battles for them ?"

"Exactly ! Only we won't."

Old Henderson stirred. "I'm sorry, Cooke," he said. "God knows I've done everything I could to help, but I can't order these men into the air. They wouldn't obey me, even if I did."

Dick stood there without hearing. What was it Veronica had said ? "*See the first space ship leave earth for the planets?*" There wouldn't be any space ships leaving earth for the planets—not for a thousand years. There would be great black patches in the forests, and a savage race of men squabbling on the plains. Mankind would at long last be jerked back that thousand years the blackout had started—only there wouldn't be any settlements to plan the future. There would be nothing but blank despair. "*Wonder what you have done to help?*" she had said. He had done nothing.

"I'll go !" he said, surprised at the dullness of his voice. "I'll take J 99, with the bow blaster."

For a moment there was an awestruck silence as they all stared at him. He was unaware of their stares.

"I'll want radar direction," he said dully. "Have they pinned the plane yet ?"

"What in blazes !" Junior yelled. "Have you gone crazy, Dick ?"

"Probably, Junior. Only I'm going up there to stop this jet coming. I don't know why I'm going, but I'm going."

"Well !" Junior said, his big face a mask of astonishment. "Damn it, boy, if I don't string along with you. J 99's a good ship, Dick, and I'm a better pilot than you. I'll leave the radar screen and the blaster to you. I'll simply give you a five second target."

They shook hands.

"Gentlemen," Cooke said. "I don't know what to say. This is no time for words—even if they could express all our feelings. Good luck to you, that's all !"

Henderson Senior looked at them out of his age-old eyes under their bushy brows. "Thank you, lads," he said gruffly. "Thank you from an old man."

AT 20,000 feet the air was crystal clear and seemed to snap with the cold. Away below them the forest stretched clear to the horizon in all directions, a sea of green, showing no sign of the settlement they had left.

Junior was at the controls, holding her back to 750 m.p.h., reserving the recently charged tubes for the accelerations that combat would require. At that height they left no trace in the sky beyond the tip, fifty feet away, of their flame. Henderson swung her left and right, fingering the button controls as he would a piano, feeling her respond to his tests with the gay zest of youth.

Dick sat hunched over the radar screens. That on the left was clear as the

beam swung ahead of them, searching for the enemy. The centre screen, too, was bare, as the ground plotter was switched off, but the right screen had a single speck of green light. That was the ground-controlled screen, used to link them with the enemy should their own screen fail.

"Anything yet?" Henderson asked, satisfied with the performance of the machine.

"Nothing, Junior. Controls O.K.?"

"Fine and dandy! She's a ballerina if there ever was one. Bet I could stand her on the point of a pin!"

Henderson was like that. Once airborne, he had forgotten all the events of the preceeding twelve hours and could only remember that there was an enemy in the sky, an enemy to be destroyed.

Not so Dick Maybach. He was still in the befuddled daze that the stunning sequence of events had reduced him to. First Veronica, and then Cooke, and finally the threat of death from above. He kept hearing Veronica's voice saying over and over again, *'What have you done to help'*—only the phrase had become a dagger now, pointed at his heart. What had he done? What, in comparison to Henderson Senior, the grand old man who, without passion, had engineered the destruction of half the globe because he believed it right.

Veronica, with her critical faculty for analysis, had seen all Dick's weaknesses. Now he came to think back, analytically, to the night of the blackout, he had acted all through because of Veronica. Firstly because he wanted to destroy the Mentasthetic Centres because they threatened to absorb his wife—his wife, yes it all came back to Veronica. Now she was no longer his wife. At least, in this last adventure, he was uninfluenced by other ties.

HENDERSON pointed down, and staring through the perspex, Dick saw the town of Burnside stretched out on a pocket handkerchief. He thought he saw the shell of his own house, imagined he could see figures standing in the street staring at the rare spectacle of a jet ship above them.

Suddenly his attention was back on the left radar screen. A faint green dot had appeared to the left of the screen. Quickly he adjusted the controls, taking angle, range, course in a matter of seconds.

"She's coming!" he called. "30,000 feet, 169° 28'. You'd better go up a bit, Junior."

Junior responded with a grin and a play of his hand, putting in bow tubes to lift the ship in a steep climb to 40,000 feet. As he levelled off, he turned back to Dick for an instant.

"She's picked us up!" Dick said. "She's altered course and is climbing. I make her about fifty miles away now. New course, 150°, Junior."

Junior altered course, closing in and still climbing. At 50,000 feet they were twenty-five miles apart, with J 99 about 10,000 feet above her enemy; Junior switched on the short distance radar screen set above the vision panel, and Dick clambered forward to take his post by the controls of the single blaster.

"I'll try and get a look at her first!" Henderson called. "If she's a one blaster job, we'll bounce her from aft."

The other ship had altered course again, still apparently undecided whether the dot on their screen was friend or foe. She was circling east, and as Henderson followed the curve, it dawned on Hartnung that the dot was trying

to close in. At once he began to climb.

Henderson grinned. He put J 99 up, maintaining his lead of 10,000 feet, and watched the gap close. Hartnung realised that the fight for top dog had been lost, and slackened his drive, holding back to see how the attack would develop.

Henderson circled, catching a glimpse of the ship so far below. Even at the distance he read the answers to his queries. He even recognised the distinctive lines of the ship, guessing her to be a Class K craft, with long, raking lines that made her look much faster than she was; she would have a fixed blaster forward, and two traversing blasters aft.

"I'll have a go at her belly," Henderson said crisply, "Try and get her from below and forward. All set?"

Dick nodded, and pulled the heavy helmet over his head and zipped his clothing shut. Penetration of the hull at that height meant certain death to the crew unless heavy protective clothing was worn. Then he got down behind the blaster and switched in the warming coils. Through a vision port he could see the silver speck away below them.

HENDERSON curved sharply to the north, and then stood J 99 on her nose, cutting most of the power from the main drive in readiness for the call the bow tubes were going to make when he pulled her out of the dive.

They dropped through 10,000 feet like a bullet, and then Henderson played with the control panel, feeding the power to two bow tubes, feeling with the sense of a man almost born in the air the moment when the bow tubes forced her out of the vertical. At the moment he slipped full drive to the main tubes, stepped up the bows, and fought madly against the blackout that swept towards him like a dark sea.

Like a shooting star, J 99 came out of her drop, curved, levelled, and began to climb at 10 Gs towards the belly of the enemy ship. Through the mists that threatened to obscure his vision, Dick saw the shining metal hull, crystal clear against the deep azure of the heavens.

The range closed rapidly from five miles to 1 mile, and Dick fingered the button on the stock of the blaster. He could see every line of the K craft now, graceful, curving, with her in-built scanners and thick vision plates. A lovely ship, he thought, and transmitted the thought to his fingers to fire.

He was one fifth of a second too late. Hartnung had held his course to the last so that Henderson should have no chance to follow him. When J 99 was five hundred yards away, Hartnung put in all four of his top bow tubes and like a plummet, fell away, missing the soaring J 99 by a few yards. It was a beautiful manoeuvre, perfectly timed, and by the time Henderson had levelled off and picked up the K craft on his radar screen, Hartnung was 10 miles to the north, and climbing.

Henderson saw red, and flogged the ship into a mad speed that threatened to strip her tube linings. This time he tried no fancy tricks, but getting five thousand feet above Hartnung, came in fast on his tail. Dick saw the rear top blaster traversing, and held his fire. He sensed that both gunners would fire together at 500 yards, and that the best shot would survive; he was unprepared for the actual action of the enemy blaster.

The man behind it must have panicked, for at well over a thousand yards he pressed his button, and sent packet after packet flickering into the cosmos.

Dick grinned, holding his fire until the range had closed.

Yet, by one of those queer tricks of destiny, the panicking man behind the blaster got the correct drift and orbit. One moment J 99 was dropping towards her tail like a perfectly trained swallow. The next, Henderson sprawled on the cockpit floor, his body charred beyond recognition, and a six foot hole was torn in the metal of the hull. J 99 fell off her course and began to swoop earthwards.

DICK recovered quickly, surprised to find he had escaped even a burn. The packet had struck high up, catching Henderson's head and torso, but missing the control panel and the ship's vitals. Quickly Dick jumped to the chair, playing button after button until he had levelled off J 99. He switched to automatic on a course that followed Hartnung, and then dragged Henderson's remains aft. He switched the blaster control from manual to automatic, and locked her directly forward. Then he took over the controls again.

He found he was 5,000 feet below Hartnung, and ten miles behind. He began to climb, using the extra margin of speed that J 99 possessed to get on the K craft's tail again. This time he meant there to be no mistakes; looking down he could see they were well into the forest, and the mutual screen operated from the settlement showed that they were within twenty miles of Hartnung's target.

And now the silver bullet was beneath him again, and he put J 99 to the dive, switching to automatic control by the radar screen so that if he were killed, the ship would go on to her target. The tenuous atmosphere swirled about the rent in her hull, the ship shuddered under the drive of full power; jet J 99 was a good ship and held her course as straight as a light beam.

He knew he was going to die; the knowledge was a dull throb inside him, yet it aroused no fear, no qualms. At last he knew he was right, dead right. *'The first space ship leave earth for the planets'* Veronica had said. They would do it, those mutants. The normals would never do it. He remembered the vision of the two figures hanging from a tree, and the drunken dance of the normals about the burning house. That was how near the normals were to savages. They could never conquer space; in ten thousand years they had not even mastered their elemental passions. He remembered Veronica, the new Veronica, so cool, so decisive, a keen knife blade in comparison to him, a blunted axe.

The gap between the two ships closed; the rear blaster began its panicky spraying of the heavens with faint mauve beams of light. Dick watched one arch by the cockpit, enjoying its colour and beauty of form. At five hundred yards he reached for the control to answer the fire with one deadly burst, and at that moment he died as a ray packet sheered away the front of the cockpit, charring him to a cinder.

J 99 struck the K craft and the remaining atomic bombs exploded, setting ablaze a thousand square miles of forest, into the centre of which the splinters of metal from the two jet ships rained.

In the west, Venus, risen early, shone unblinkingly towards the Earth, waiting for the new race of men to reach out and encompass her in their arms.

THE END

THE DAWN BREAKS RED

MARTIAN'S FANCY

By WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

If there is life on the other planets in our System, cross-breeding may bring some funny results when interplanetary travel comes—in more ways than one.

Illustrated by HUNTER

IT was a nice night for star-gazing, except that your feet died of the cold in your shoes.

Joe removed his face from the peeping end of the three-inch refractor and said: "Here, Henry, you take over. I'm going in to sit on the stove. It's just barely possible that I may save the back of my lap from frostbite."

"The proper thing is to rub it with snow," said Henry, wisely.

"Sounds an improper thing to me. A fool thing to say anyway. It's darn cold, but it's not snowing."

"That's because there are no clouds," said Henry.

"Dear Henry!" said Joe. "I know I'm an old fool, in my dotage, a mellow eighteen. And you were sixteen yesterday, but your brain-pan is bulging at the sutures and you're head boy of the school and all that. I'm humble. I'm willing to sit at your feet and learn anything. But when I was in diapers I knew that snow came from clouds."

"I meant," said Henry, patiently, "that it's cold because there are no clouds. So the ground radiates its day heat more quickly into the upper atmospherical stratas."

"Never mind it. Apply your optic to the telescope or you'll miss Pop's ship."

"The 21st Century Express from Mars, at this telescopic power and in these latitudes, first becomes visible at 10.42 p.m. Neither sooner nor later. There are four minutes to go yet."

"Pop's due a month's furlough, you know. He may be tight, and stepping on the gas," said Joe.

"Pop doesn't drink when he's in charge of a ship."

"Oh, no? How about that time in '02 when—"

"He won his case," said Henry. "He proved that the pipe to the fuel tank was cracked and dripped alcohol over his bunk."

"Yes," said Joe. "Did you ever hear Pop's tale about the guy who smashed the atom with a coke hammer and didn't mean to? . . . Look, I'm *cold*. Take over that blanketty telescope, will you?"

Henry sighed, and did so.

"YOU'D better take a reef in that language before Pop hears you," he said. "Anyway, you've got the telescope wrong. Should be fifteen hours, twenty-two minutes Right Ascension and plus forty-eight degrees, nineteen



minutes, ten seconds Declination. For the last hour you've been looking at a place five hundred miles off the Earth-Mars shipping lane."

"I hope you enjoyed your birthday yesterday," said Joe, with solicitude. "I've a hunch it may well have been your last. I think you're a—"

He told him what he thought Henry was. Henry merely looked pained and readjusted the telescope.

"That ought to keep your ears warm," added Joe, and marched into the house to warm his own.

He felt quite pleased with the last effort in invective. It was perhaps his most comprehensive to date. He'd worked in every word he'd picked up from the crew on the one space trip he'd had.

That had only been to the Moon. Just one of the common "Three Days on the Moon" pleasure trips. Pleasure trips never gave you more than three days there—Earth days, not lunar ones. They wouldn't be pleasure trips if they did. After three days you'd had all the Moon had to offer.

The novelty of doing twenty-feet high jumps and sixty-feet broad jumps had worn off. You'd stopped trying to count all the stars you could see because you realised life was too short. The sun's corona was something, but even the beauty of that got monotonous to regard: it didn't change like a sunset. You'd done the trips to the queer rock formations, but you'd seen crazier ones in Ireland. And space-suits were tiresome to put on. On the third day you wondered if it was worth it, and if it wouldn't be more fun to sit in the ship's lounge and play solitaire.

Joe had spent his third day in the crew's quarters. He told them his father was skipper of the 21st Century. They weren't much impressed. Nothing

much did seem to impress people who'd camped in the swamp forests of Venus, had near-collisions with Phobos, shot the dark ring of Saturn, been icebound on Iapetus, and ventured a quarter of a light-year into the gulf beyond Pluto's orbit.

Joe sang very small about the Moon when he returned. Even to Henry, who'd never been higher than the top of Mount Everest. He'd made up his mind. He was going to be a spaceman. Just an ordinary engineer or assistant navigator at first. Then, when he'd seen everything, he'd become skipper of a regular liner, like Dad.

Meanwhile, he was working on the idiom. Also on a beard. That wasn't working out too well. Just his luck to have thin sandy hair.

"THAR she blows!" called Henry from the garden, and Joe ran out. He pushed Henry aside and had a look himself.

It twinkled rather more, but it only looked like a star among other stars. But it was a star over which his father had absolute control. Odd, that Mars, from which it had come, had already set below the horizon.

He knew he was seeing the ship tail on, with the exhaust going all out to brake. Presently it would grow bigger, then elongate as the ship fell towards the spaceport fifty miles to the south. Then vanish altogether when it dropped below the line of the Muldoon Hills.

But while it was visible, he watched it with a quickened heart and a strange sense of longing about to be fulfilled. Joe idolised his father, and the opportunities for seeing him were so few.

He'd had no opportunities at all of seeing his mother. She died when young Henry was born.

IT had gone. In a quarter of an hour or so, Pop would be ringing from the spaceport.

They brought the telescope in and began to dismantle it. Lassie, Joe's collie bitch, came out of the kitchen to help with the dismantling. Joe got the name "Lassie" out of an old novel he read. After two minutes of her aid he called her another name. Her methods of dismantling were too drastic.

"Wonder what Pop'll bring back this time?" Joe mused presently. "Sure to bring you something for your birthday, Henry."

Henry looked speculatively round the walls of the room. They were heavy with curios from the ends of the universe.

He grunted, and said: "What I'd like is something you can get along the street at the corner bookstore: Plato's Dialogues. What he'll probably bring me is a stuffed, six-eyed Uranian mongoose, or an old parking notice carved on stone from the ancient lost city of Oomloo or Onkitonk or some crazy place that no one's been to for a million years—because they had more sense than Pop."

"You're an ungrateful blank," said Joe.

The phone rang. Joe took it.

"That you, Dad? . . . It's good to hear you . . . Oh, *he's* all right. Still top of the school. The headmaster's getting private tutoring from him in the evenings . . . Lassie's fine . . . No, it's Bertha's night out. She'll be in soon . . . Yes . . . I'll do that . . . Yes . . . Wassat?"

The phone repeated something.

"I don't get it," said Joe.

"You don't have to get it. Get the sand!" said the phone right out loud so that Henry heard.

"Right . . . O.K., be seeing you." Joe hung up.

"Sand?" said Henry.

"Pop's bringing a visitor from Mars to stay with us. We've got to get the spare bedroom ready. And go down to the sandpit and bring back a couple of barrow-loads of sand."

"What do we do with the sand?"

"We dump it in the bathtub," said Joe.

"On the level?"

"Yes. That's what Pops says."

"Is he expecting a fire?"

"Maybe the visitor from Mars is hot stuff," said Joe. "Maybe, I don't know. You never know what Pop'll bring back with him. Remember the little bat-man from Venus who used to hang upside down on the hall stand?"

"Yes," said Henry. "And I remember Bertha snatching him down one day, thinking he was an umbrella."

"And I remember her language when he bit her on the—"

"Quite," said Henry. "He must have thought she was Cleopatra on the way out. Wonder how the new visitor will treat her?"

"I expect he'll serenade her with plaintive Martian love songs, and make woeful ballads to her eyebrow—Shakespeare."

"Which eyebrow?"

"You know she's only got one," said Joe. "It carries on straight across and joins up with her hair."

"And her hair joins up with everything else," said Henry. "Come on, let's get the sand."

THEY were building a sand castle in the bathtub when Bertha came in.

"Havers!" she said. (She'd been out with a Scotsman all evening.) "Will you kids never grow up?"

"Mentally, I'm old enough to be your remotest ancestor," said Henry, giving a final pat to the curve of a turret, which promptly split and collapsed. "As for Joe, this is occupational therapy. You're late, Bertha."

"I had to walk home again," said Bertha, peeking at herself in the bathroom mirror. "Can't imagine why it always happens to me."

The boys could imagine, but they were polite, and kept their comments inside their head.

Henry's interior comment was:

"Magic mirror on the wall,

Tell me, who is hairiest of all?"

Joe's was: "Poor Bertha! Even her worst friends won't tell her. But, Jiminey, I wish I could grow hair like that!"

They were both fond of Bertha. Since their mother died, she'd been their nurse, cook and maid.

Bertha had lost her figure. She sometimes lost her senses. But she never lost hope.

She had nice eyes, a nice disposition, and a nice moustache. Her neck was

decidedly furry, and so were her ears. She had arms like Eugene O'Neill's hirsute stoker. The rest of her was her own secret.

It wasn't her fault that her grandmother had been a bearded lady with Barnum's.

"Pop's back," said Joe. "He's bringing a Martian with him. Going to stay here for a bit. You'd better get the spare room ready."

"Some of those Martians are nice-looking guys," said Bertha, thoughtfully. "Even if they do have funny habits."

"Pop didn't say whether it's a him or a her," said Joe.

"Of course, it might be a young lady your father's brought home," said Bertha. "He's a man that needs a woman. I've often thought that he might have married again, if only for the sake of you kids."

Henry said: "I can wash behind my own ears, thank you."

"Why don't you?" said Joe. "Hi, *gid* down, Lassie!"

It was too late. Lassie landed neatly on top of the sand castle, which crumbled slowly beneath her. She turned round twice in the ruins to make her bed, and curled up for the night.

There was the sound of a key turning in the lock of the front door.

"Pop!" shouted the boys together, and went down the stairs like an avalanche.

IT was Pop all right, all stomach and shoulders, and a wide grin splitting his beard. He clasped his sons to him, one in each arm, lifting them off the ground as easily as he did ten years ago.

"Hello, boys, how's everything?"

They both began to tell him, gabbling together. And then they stopped in mid-flood, for from behind their father's bulk stepped the oddest figure.

"Oh, yes," said Pop. "This is Charles."

They stared at Charles. So did Bertha from the top of the stairs.

"Och!" murmured Bertha. "Farewell, romance!"

Vertically, there was about five feet of Charles. Horizontally, he scarcely existed. If you tied up a bundle of ten of him, you'd have something equivalent to the waistline of a telegraph post. He seemed to be a hair on which a lot of other hairs grew.

Still, if he did look as though he'd been shut in a door for a couple of years, he had arms and legs and a face, complete with eyes, nose, and mouth, all roughly in the right places. But it was hard to detect his features. They nestled in the shock of brown hair which grew all over his face. He looked like a floor mop wrong way up.

"Pleased to meet you, Ch-Charles," stuttered Joe.

A voice like a scraped E string answered: "Why should you be pleased? You don't know me. Therefore your statement lacks content."

"Er—shut the door, Charles," said the skipper, hastily. "Let's go in."

They shuffled into the parlour in some confusion. Joe was still trying to think of a come-back, couldn't, got annoyed, and said belligerently: "All right, then. I'm *not* pleased to meet you."

"There is no point in making negative statements," said Charles, like a squeaking slate pencil. "It is obvious that you cannot be pleased, nor angry nor joyous nor indifferent, nor entertain any emotion about an object until you know what that object is."

"Look here, object," said Joe, riled. "I'm entertaining the emotion of anger about you right now. I have a no doubt pointless desire to wrap you around the table-leg and tie you in a neat bow. In my illogical opinion, you're a blank blank—"

"Joe!" rapped his father. "Where'd you pick up that language?"

"I heard you say it to your first officer, Dad."

"This," said the skipper deliberately, "is not a spaceship. This is home. I don't want to hear either of you boys using such language ever again within these four walls."

"There are eight walls," murmured Henry. "Eleven, if you count the coal shed. 'Anyway, I never swear when I'm upset.'"

"That is sensible of you," said Charles, coiled in an armchair that had room for a crowd of him.

"I merely smash the furniture," said Henry.

BERTHA came in cautiously. The skipper greeted her with a roar.

"How's our old Bertha? Still courting? Here, I brought you something back." He tossed her a small bottle. "That's the finest perfume on Mars, Bertha. Distilled from the stomach glands of the rare Avapos lizard. All the eligible bachelors in the town will be lining up to smell you."

"Oh . . . thank you, sir," said Bertha, dubiously.

"That reminds me—here's a birthday present for you, Henry."

The skipper produced a little contraption like a steel cage with coiled springs all over it.

"Thanks, Pop. What is it?"

"It's a trap for catching Tima-birds."

"I like nothing better than trapping Tima-birds before breakfast," said Henry.

"As Tima-birds are indigenous to Mars only, and you've never been there, your statement is manifestly incorrect," said Charles, precisely.

"Oh, no," said Henry. "I said I like nothing better. I'm fond of nothing. Have you any on Mars?"

Charles hesitated. "What's it like?" he ventured.

"It's like nothing on Earth," said Henry, blandly.

Joe guffawed.

"Stop this nonsense," said the skipper. "I want you boys to get together and know each other. Bertha, what about supper?"

"Yes, sir," said Bertha. She'd sniffed the perfume and was still a little pale. "I've got some steaks—"

"Steaks all round," said the skipper. "But don't cook Charles's. He prefers it raw."

"Raw?" gulped Bertha.

"Yes. And if you've any meat bones, you might put them on the edge of his plate. He likes a good gnaw to finish with."

Bertha went out slowly, as if she were thinking. She always had to go slowly about thinking.

"No doubt," said Joe, addressing Charles, "there's some point in your taking your meat raw?"

"No doubt at all," said Charles. "Burning it merely destroys some of its vitamins. I see no point in *that*."

Joe said nothing. However, he had small choice to do anything else after that and during supper, for the skipper started in on yarning about the places he'd seen and the things he'd done since he was last home. He'd seen and done plenty. Towards the end he had some competition, for Charles gnawed bones with a noise like an ice-flow breaking up. This operation revealed to those interested that Charles had a set of nicely matched grass-green teeth.

When the last bone had disappeared, Charles said: "I should like my bath now and go to bed."

"The bathtub is full of sand," said Joe. "I thought—"

"Good. If you'll just show me where it is . . ." said Charles, getting up.

"It's the custom in Charles's quarter of Mars to bathe in sand," pointed out the skipper. "You see, there's not much water there—"

"Even if I lived beside the Main Canal," interrupted Charles, "I'd never think of bathing in it. Water! It's for fish and Terrestrials. Thank heavens it never rains on Mars. Else we'd be snuffling around all the time with colds and pneumonia and rheumatism like you Terrestrials do. It's inefficient as a cleanser, too. For removing dirt one needs an abrasive like clean, dry sand."

"I see," said Joe, thoughtfully. "Would you like a loan of my wire brush for your back?"

"It's not necessary," said Charles. "I'm quite clean. I bathed only last year. Where's the bathroom?"

JOE took him up. Charles went in first, and let out a squeak. "What is the meaning of this?"

Joe found him staring at Lassie, who was still curled up on the sand pile. She had opened one eye and was using it to stare back at Charles.

"Does everything have to have a meaning?" said Joe. "I guess she's just tired."

"Here, you quadruped, get off!" said Charles, pushing at her.

"Grrr!" said Lassie, unamiably. She showed a line of teeth that were not green, but very white and very sharp.

"She doesn't like being pushed," said Joe.

Charles stopped pushing. He stepped back.

"Not that it matters," he said. "She has quite contaminated the sand. I couldn't think of using it now."

"O.K., skip the bath," said Joe. "I'll order you one for next year."

"I don't think I could stand Earth for a year," said Charles. "Where's the bedroom?"

Joe showed him. Charles went in.

"Good-night," said Joe.

"I don't think it is," said Charles, and closed the door.

Joe went downstairs. "Father," he said, "why the blank hell did you bring that pernickety blank back with you?"

"Watch that language," said the skipper. But he avoided meeting his son's eye.

"I think that for once Joe's language was perfectly justified," said Henry, quietly.

"I'll show you how that Tima-bird trap works, Henry," said the skipper, as though he hadn't heard him.

"I'd rather know how Charles works."

The skipper faced them. He braced himself.

"All right," he said. "It's this way. Some years before I married your mother, I was marooned somewhere down near the South Polar Cap of Mars. Shipwrecked. Spaceships were few in those days. We were still pioneering. I didn't know how many years it'd be before I got picked up, if at all. Meantime, I lived in a Martian village. Went native to some extent. They were very good to me. Especially one girl . . . She was beautiful. We got very friendly. Well, I was only a young sailor, cut off from his kind. And to cut a long story short, she bore me a son: Charles."

Joe could only sit open-mouthed.

Henry said: "But he doesn't look at all like a Martian."

The skipper said unhappily: "I don't really approve of these interplanetary marriages. The most queer things happen. Charles is something of a mutant. There's nothing quite like him."

"I'll say," said Joe. "How old is he?"

"Twenty-five Earth years. Still a young man. His mother was killed by the bite of a sand-snake two years after his birth. I . . . never mentioned his existence to your mother. He seemed quite happy with his uncle and aunt. I left him there. I called to see him most trips I made."

"And have you brought him home to live with us?" pursued Henry.

"Oh, no. I've only brought him here for a while to complete his education. He ought to know something of Earth and Terrestrials. Then he's going back to set up business. They think a lot of him there."

"Not half as much as he thinks of himself, I reckon," said Joe.

"Don't be like that, Joe. His ways are a little different, that's all."

"Different from ours or different from the Martians?"

"Different from both, I guess," said the skipper with a little sigh.

"Well, I can't pretend I'm bursting with brotherly love," said Joe, "but I'll be as helpful and forbearing as I can."

"Good boy," said the skipper, and looked questioningly at Henry.

"I think he's interesting," said Henry. "Even more interesting than the Tima-bird trap."

AT breakfast Charles protested that the uncooked bacon slices Bertha brought him were too thin and too few. He didn't like cured meat. He preferred it quite raw.

Bertha was indignant. "For land snakes," she protested (an old flame, a Southerner, had rung her up that morning) "what do you-alls want me to do—go out and catch a live pig for you to take a bite out of?"

Charles said: "No—kill it first."

He produced a piece of green moss and began to chew it. It was rubbery, and he went on chewing it.

"You can't be getting many vitamins out of that," said Joe.

"There is no nourishment in Martian moss," said Charles. "It's customary on Mars merely to chew it."

"There is, of course, a point in that?" half queried Henry.

"Naturally. When one is hungry, through conditioned reflexes one's jaws want to be working. This gives them the partial satisfaction of going through the motions until such time as I can get them something more nutritious."

"Is that what stains your teeth green?" asked Henry.

"It is."

"Scarcely an improvement on Nature," said Joe.

"I disagree," said Charles. "Green is the most restful colour to both Terrestrial and Martian eyes. Brilliant white merely agitates the optic nerve. Moss-chewing is a widespread habit on Mars and aesthetically sound."

"Why not extrapolate that notion, and go and dip yourself in a tank of dye and become the complete sea-green incorruptible—a big, beautiful eyeful of rest?" suggested Joe.

Charles looked down at his thin, brown, furry body.

"That's a point worth consideration," he said, thoughtfully.

"Listen, Joe—and Henry," broke in the skipper. "I've got a lot on my hands the next few days. The Spaceways Board is hauling me away to attend an inquiry into an alleged case of drunkenness on my ship—"

"Whose case?" asked Joe.

"Er—mine. All a mistake, of course. It was an attack of space-sickness."

"Space-sickness after twenty years' experience?" said Joe.

"My son," said the skipper, with dignity, "the English admiral, Lord Nelson, was inevitably sea-sick every time he put to sea. It's just a matter of having a sensitive stomach. I was saying, as I shan't be available I'd like you two to take Charles around. Show him our way of life. Explain things to him. And all have a good time."

Henry thought: "There's going to have to be plenty of explaining."

Joe thought: "Good time! *Good time!*"

Both said: "O.K., Pop."

FOR the next few days they were attempting to explain and have a good time. It was difficult. It wasn't made any easier by a running fight Charles had with Lassie. They'd never been on good terms from the start, and the start was the unfortunate affair of the sand bath.

Charles had an insatiable appetite for meat bones. Whatever the boys found for him was never enough. He stole them from Lassie's plate at all hours. He even took them at night, and gnawed them in bed.

Lassie tried to grab them back when she caught him at it. There were undignified scuffles. Charles had more strength than anyone might have guessed. He usually got away with the booty.

"For the love of Pete, quit this fighting!" yelled Joe, after one particularly violent all-in mix up. (Charles got the bone again.) "Is this the way you behave on Mars?"

"I'm not fighting, only defending myself from aggression," said Charles, tearing a piece of meat from the bone with his verdant teeth. "On Mars, anyone who has a surplus of food gives it to anyone who needs it. Your dog doesn't, apparently, know that gracious custom. You should have trained it better."

"Hell's tinkling bells!" said Joe. "Lassie's got to eat too."

"If she were hungry, she'd have eaten these odd bones," said Charles. "She hadn't. She wasn't hungry. I was."

"You always are," said Joe.

Then, again, music, poetry, and dancing made no appeal to Charles. He could see no point to them.

After his first (and last) film show, he said: "How can you expect me to get excited over mere photographs of one man killing another, when I know perfectly well that the gun was loaded with blanks, the blood was tomato ketchup, and the victim at the moment is probably lying drunk under a bar in Hollywood?" he asked.

Joe said: "When you were a kid, didn't anyone dangle you on their knee and tell you fairy stories?"

"They told me what I wanted to hear," said Charles.

"What was that?"

"Statistics," said Charles.

"Oh," said Joe. "Well, there's a lecture on economics at the Town Hall. Just full of statistics. Let's go and have a happy time there."

CHARLES listened to the lecture in silence. Even on the way home he volunteered no comments. When they were home, sprawling in armchairs, Henry said: "I thought at least, Charles, you'd ask why some men burn coffee, throw fish back in the sea, plough crops under, while millions of other men starve."

"No doubt they have their reasons for it," said Charles, in his high, thin voice.

"Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" exclaimed Joe. "You don't think that's reasonable, surely?"

"I don't think anything Terrestrials do is strictly reasonable," said Charles. "Because this is supposed to be an age of reason, they think it incumbent on them to provide reasons for what they do. But the reasons they give are merely excuses to justify actions taken solely through emotional needs."

"Including that economist?" asked Henry.

"Yes. Economics is not the rigid science such people pretend—else there wouldn't be so many answers. Anyway, economists always leave out the human factor, because it's unpredictable. Though they don't say that: they just shut their eyes to it. That economist was biased in favour of his own pet theories, which he plugged merely to justify his need to be recognised as an authority, someone of importance. His reasoning was emotional, and the emotion was vanity. Your psychologists call it rationalisation."

"You agree, then, that our psychologists know what they're talking about?" said Joe.

"If there are fifty Terrestrial economic theories, there are ninety psychological ones," said Charles. "And the preachers of each believe they have the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help them. Believing it because they want to believe it. Freudians, Adlerites, Jungists, behaviourists, and all kinds of branches and hybrids."

"Then," said Henry, neatly, "you believe their theory of rationalisation because you want to believe it. And you want to believe it because you want to belittle Terrestrials and exalt yourself. If all reasons are emotional, so are yours."

"I deal in facts, not reasons," said Charles, popping a fresh lump of moss into his mouth.

"All facts are only beliefs," said Henry. "You believe a wall is there because you believe in your sense impressions. But any hypnotist can manufacture sense impressions for you. Pour hydrochloric acid on zinc and it gives

off hydrogen. That's a fact, you say. Is it? You only believe it is because every time hydrochloric's been poured on zinc, hydrogen *has* been given off. And so you believe it always will. You *believe*. One day that action may give off attar of roses instead."

"Two plus two equals four," said Charles. "That's a fact, whether you believe it or not."

"Two which plus two which?" rapped back Henry. "Two pairs plus two quartettes equals twelve. Figures can be false labels—in fact, they usually are. Nothing is a unit. Nothing can be separated entirely from its environment. And no part of the whole is exactly like any other part of the whole, and to speak of two of them or more is absurd."

"Go it, Henry," said Joe, admiringly. "Now I can see why you're top boy."

CHARLES chewed calmly. "Merely rhetoric," he said. "Basically, mathematics is fact. $x^2 - y^2 = (x + y)(x - y)$ whatever values you give x and y . That's my kind of reasoning. Factual, not emotional. That's why my behaviour is controlled and logical, and your is that of untrained animals. Look at your crazy wars, which benefit no one. . . ."

Henry bit his nails.

Joe waited, but Henry remained silent.

"All right, Charles," said Joe. "You win. You're the only sane person here."

Abruptly, Charles stood up on the seat of his armchair and let out a strange shrill whoop. It might have been a whoop of triumph. It might not. They never knew.

The next instant, the thin hairy body of him was hurtling through the air towards Bertha, who'd just come in with a tray of drinks. The drinks became brief fountains. The glasses became fragments. The tray thumped on the floor. Bertha also thumped on the floor, rather more heavily: there was more of her.

Then she shrieked. Charles had bitten her neck.

"He's gone mad!" shouted Joe, and dived for Charles. Charles whipped through his fingers like a jerked rope. *Crash!* Charles went out through the window. He hadn't stopped to open it. Fresh air blew in through the star-shaped hole in the main pane. Henry ran over and caught a glimpse of an attenuated brown body leaping up into a tree and floating off like a squirrel.

"Faith!" exclaimed Bertha (who'd been out with an Irish cop). "And here's me bin thinking the spalpeen was a gentleman after all!"

THEY'D just decided to send for the skipper when he arrived of his own accord.

"It's all right, boys," he bellowed. "All over. My doctor proved to them it was only giddiness through high blood pressure."

"I thought it was space-sickness," said Joe.

"Me? Space-sickness after twenty years' experience?" said the skipper, staring at him. "Don't be idiotic, boy. It was my poor old blood pressure. Had it for years . . . Where's Charles?"

"That," said Joe, "is the question of this day and age."

He told the skipper about Charles.

The skipper sank slowly into the chair Charles had used as a diving-board.

They could never see much of his face at any time because of the omnipresent beard, but what was visible was largely worried.

"Good grief," he said. "I've made a ghastly mistake. How could I have been so stupid? It must have been that blood pressure."

"What sort of mistake?" asked Henry.

The skipper regarded him thoughtfully. He tugged at his beard.

"I'm afraid, Henry, you're too young to be told. Leave the room for a bit, while I talk it over with your brother."

"All right," said Henry. "I'll get it from Joe later."

"If you do, I'll skin the pair of you," said the skipper.

"Does it concern sex?" said Henry, idly, getting up. He saw from his father's face that it did. He added: "The editor of the *Encyclopedia of Sexual Physiology* has asked me to write a section for the next edition. I'll go and get on with it."

The skipper glared after him as he went to the door and opened it. There Henry paused, looking back, and opened his mouth to speak.

"Git!" said the skipper ferociously.

"I was only going to remark that the section concerned Martian sexual cycles," said Henry, mildly.

The Captain swallowed half his beard, regurgitated it, spluttered, and said: "Shut the door. Come back. Sit down. Keep quiet."

Henry did it all, even keeping quiet.

THE skipper began: "For your benefit, Joe—as Henry seems to know all about it—*homo sapiens* in one sense is unique in the universe. Unlike the other animals on his planet, his mating season does not confine itself to a short period. It is, indeed, somewhat heightened in the spring, the normal mating period, but it continues almost as strongly throughout the year. This energy may have raised us higher than the apes—"

"If we *are* higher than the apes," interjected Henry. "My theory is that all these mad wars are nothing more than a release of built up and frustrated sexual energy, peculiar to our species only because such tension *is* peculiar to our species only—"

"I said keep quiet!" barked the skipper, banging the arm of his chair with his fist and glaring at Henry.

Henry met his glare steadily. "It makes people aggressive," he murmured, and the skipper stopped banging.

"The point I'm trying to make," said the skipper, with an effort, "is that the Martians have a mating season similar to terrestrial animals. Only it's even shorter and more violent. The rest of the year they are calm, unemotional, logical creatures. But during that short period they are not responsible for their actions."

"I see," said Joe. "In the spring, a young Martian's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love. But it *isn't* spring."

"No. It isn't—here. But it is on Mars," said the skipper. "That was my appalling mistake. Of course, Charles's sexual rhythms go on independent of the seasons here."

"But it happened so suddenly," said Joe. "Bingo!—and he was away."

"That's the way it happens," said his father, gravely.

"How long does it last?"

"About a terrestrial week. Even shorter, if the instinct is satisfied."

"What can we do?"

"Only two things. One: bait a trap here for Charles with raw meat, and, if we catch him, lock him up for a week."

"And the other?" pursued Joe.

"Hope for the best," replied his father, cryptically.

The skipper went and told Bertha to keep her window shut every night until further orders.

THEY saw nothing more of Charles that day. They made a couple of searches around the neighbourhood, trying to employ Lassie as a bloodhound. But she thought they were looking for cats, and there were several spots of bother with the neighbours before they abandoned that idea.

Late that night they put a leg of mutton on the kitchen table, and shut the door. Almost at once there were sounds of scratching and a thump. They flung open the door and rushed back in the kitchen.

Lassie had got the joint off the table and was dealing with it on the floor. They rescued it—or most of it.

"Lassie, you're as useful to us as a boil on the back of the neck," said the skipper. "Back in your basket!"

Lassie went and curled up in her basket. But she continued to eye them pathetically, hoping it was only a joke and they'd throw her the joint. But they shut her in again, jointless.

"Slight change of plan," announced the skipper. "We'll leave the bait on the dining-room table. The guard duty remains the same: two hours on duty behind the couch, and four hours in bed. You're on first, Henry. Wake me at one a.m. I'll wake Joe at three. Don't forget—let Charles get to the table, then jump on him from behind and shout. Got the rope? Good. We're off to bed."

The skipper and Joe went up.

HENRY squatted behind the couch, where he could see the window, which had been left open, and the table. After half an hour he got tired of looking at them. The floor got hard. After an hour he got tired of looking at anything. The floor got harder. After two hours, only the feeling that he was sitting on the floor with his naked pelvis kept him awake at all.

There had been no sign or hint of Charles.

He got stiffly to his feet. He went and shut the window, latching it on the inside. He hobbled up the stairs and awakened his father. Then he came down again to wait while the skipper got up.

The room was as empty as before. To be exact, emptier. The leg of mutton had gone with the wind.

Henry used a four-letter word which had come at third-hand from the skipper via Joe. He ranged the room. The window was still shut and latched on the inside. Neither Charles nor the joint were hiding behind anything. He opened the door of the kitchen and peered in. The only piece of meat there was Lassie, and she was asleep.

"What are you looking for?" said the skipper's voice in his ear.

Henry told him.

The sound and fury brought Joe down from his bed in alarm and set Lassie barking. Joe gathered some new words for his collection.

When he could hear himself speak, Henry said: "Look, there's soot in the grate."

There was a pile of it.

"Plain enough," said Joe. "Santy Charles came down the chimney. He was built for it. He always reminded me of a flue brush.

The skipper said: "Tell me, Joe—I go away so much, I can't remember—has Bertha's room got an open fireplace?"

"No," said Joe. "Just a radiator."

"Good. Well, I'll do my spell in bed. I can see Bertha's door from there when my bedroom door is open."

"And can I use your bed to do my spell?" asked Joe.

"Certainly not!" snorted the skipper. "You sit in the passage."

"Better take a cushion, Joe," said Henry.

"I don't know whether it's necessary."

"You'll find it necessary," said Henry.

"I mean," said Joe, "whether the guard is necessary now. Charles has got what he wants. He won't be back."

"I don't believe either statement," said the skipper. "We're responsible for taking precautions."

"But Bertha's no box office draw," objected Joe. "If Charles has an ounce of poetic imagination—"

"Which he hasn't," said Henry.

"—he'll do a Romeo act anywhere but under her balcony."

"Son, you don't know how a Martian's mind works in that mood. I do. That's why I'm worried. When Charles went *Bingo!* the object of his desire became an obsession with him from that moment. That object would only be someone he'd met lately. Bertha's the only woman he's met since he came. As for the romantic aspect, it only needs one common touch to satisfy a Martian's taste. And Bertha is—let's face it—good and hairy. Charles likes them that way: she's closer to his own unique appearance than the average Martian woman."

"As an authority on the subject, I concur with what Father says," said Henry.

Joe sighed. "O.K. I'll get some more sleep while I can."

HENRY awakened his father at seven in the morning.

"Anything to report?" asked the skipper, yawning.

"No. Not a thing. Your turn now."

"No good going on as late as this," said the skipper, glancing at the clock.

"The guard's finished. Bertha'll be getting up in a few minutes.

Henry was indignant.

"I've done two shifts to yours and Joe's one! It's not fair. Why, you haven't even been out of bed!"

"I had to get out to wake Joe," said the skipper. But he saw this didn't placate Henry. So he heaved himself out of bed, reached for his dressing gown, and said: "Come on, son, let's go down and have a cup of coffee."

They went down. They had to go through the dining-room to get to the kitchen. But they never got as far as the kitchen. For, reclining full length on the couch, his head on a cushion, reading the morning paper and chewing calmly, was Charles. He was relaxed. Much too relaxed for the skipper's peace of mind.

"Why, hello, there," said Charles, looking at them. A balloon grew from his lips and disappeared quicker than a piece of ectoplasm. "Great stuff, this bubble gum."

"Where did you get it?" asked the skipper, uneasily.

"Bertha gave it to me. She thought it was better for my teeth than moss. Of course it isn't, but it's more fun."

"Oh," said the skipper, and was no happier.

"What about breakfast?" said Charles. "I'm hungry."

"Wasn't the joint big enough, or did it get stuck in the chimney?" asked Henry.

"Joint? Chimney?" echoed Charles, blandly. "I cannot see the point of that remark."

"Skip it, Henry," said the Captain. "Go and knock on Bertha's door. Tell her to come down and get breakfast."

Henry found Bertha's door open. He peered in. She was not visible. From along the passages came the sound of rushing water. He knew then where she was. As he turned away, he noticed something high up on the outer wall of the bedroom. He'd seen it before, but he hadn't remembered it—till now.

Downstairs again, he took his father aside.

"Bertha's window was shut, and there's no chimney to her room," he whispered. "But—"

"But?" said the skipper.

"There's a ventilator. Very small, though."

"But not small enough, huh?" murmured the skipper, regarding Charles's pipe-stem figure extended on the couch.

"No."

"Well, thanks, Henry," said the skipper. "You're a great help—to anyone who wants a nervous breakdown."

Bertha seemed neither surprised nor perturbed to see Charles back. She smiled at him as she heaped his plate with raw ribs of mutton.

"When you get married, Charles, your wife'll have an easy time, not having to cook for you," she said.

Charles made a grimace which might have been a smile or a snarl, stuck his gum under the table, and set to on the meat.

Joe, through a mouthful of egg, said: "Somehow, I don't think she'll have quite such an easy time."

"I cannot see the point of that remark, Joe," said Bertha.

Joe's jaws stopped moving. He looked at her. Then he looked at his father. His father was trying to look at him and Henry simultaneously. The three of them had a dizzy little game of exchanging looks. Speculative looks. Meaning looks. Somewhat apprehensive looks.

"I'm taking Charles back to Mars to-morrow," the skipper announced flatly, as if he'd just made up his mind about it. He had.

"Oh," said Bertha, and sounded disappointed.

Charles crunched a rib of mutton.

"It'll be nice to get back to civilisation," he said.

BERTHA and the boys saw them off from the house next morning. Charles's baggage consisted of a hundred wafers of bubble gum and an H-bone with plenty of beef attachment.

"I'm sorry to have to leave you boys on this lunatic planet," said Charles, "but I guess you belong here. I've only one other regret: there's no bubble gum on Mars. Believe me, bubble gum is the one thing the Terrestrials have produced which might justify their existence."

"We're honoured," said Henry, politely.

"Well, so long," said Charles. "It's been awful knowing you, but I stuck it pretty well."

"Oh, you did," Joe assured him, warmly. "You stuck it like a gentleman. You spared our feelings completely."

Lassie came bounding out of the house, barking loudly. She'd just missed the H-bone from her plate.

"Bye," said Charles hastily, and dashed for the car. He shut himself in. Lassie leaped around the car like a mad thing, trying to get in. Charles, behind the plate glass, started gnawing the bone provocatively.

"Well, boys," said the skipper, looking anywhere but at them, "it's good-bye for now. Don't quite know when I'll be back. I've a few things to clear up on Mars—they may take months."

Joe's long-suffering faith in his idol oozed away. It was plain enough now. The man who could do no wrong was not superhuman. He was only human, weak, cowardly, a broken reed. Like everyone else's father.

"You mean—you're leaving us to face the music?" stuttered Joe.

"Don't worry, Joe, it may never happen," said the skipper, half-heartedly, and retreated to the car. Lassie tried to get in with him, and there was a brief melee devoid of grace or chivalry. Lassie's attack was repelled. Charles retained the bone.

"Good-bye, boys!" shouted the skipper. "Remember to keep in touch with me and let me know how things go."

The car moved off. Without saying a word, they watched it dwindle and disappear in the direction of the spaceport. Then the three of them turned back to the house, Lassie trailing dejectedly behind.

"I'm glad you called Charles a gentleman, Joe," said Bertha. "He really was, after all, when you got to know him, despite his funny little ways."

She waddled fatly on into the kitchen. They watched her gloomily.

"It's going to be a long time before we can be sure of anything," said Henry.

IT wasn't so long.

Lassie produced a litter. It was the strangest litter she or any other dog had produced. Five, spider-thin, hairy little creatures who disdained her milk and crawled blindly but unerringly to the meat plate and started cracking the bones with their teeth. Their green teeth.

Joe watched them, between relief and amazement.

"One can hardly believe it," he said, "but that settles that."

"Yes," said Henry. "That settles that. Those teeth are proof positive of the inheritance of acquired characteristics."

Joe let that go. He was already scribbling a radio-gram to the skipper.

Dear Pop,

You've become a grandfather, five times over. Congratulations.

Henry looked over his shoulder.

"That'll be a nice surprise for him," said Henry.

THE END

PLAGIARIST

By PETER PHILLIPS

In an age of advanced technology, it would be difficult for any one person to extol the virtues of a dead era. The two cultures would be utterly alien.

Illustrated by CLOTHIER

AT twelve months, Jamie sucked a chubby thumb, opened blue eyes wide in new-found joy.

"G'een fingers c'eeeping up a window," he babbled, pointing. His nurse-mentor glanced at the small, weakly plant growing in the sterilised soil of its pot inside the crystal curve of the nursery window.

She smiled indulgently. "A member of the leguminosæ exhibiting the movement known as circumnutation," she corrected him.

"Wass it 'eaching for?"

"It's not reaching for anything, James. There is no sentience in its movements. They're not even in direct response to any external stimuli. If the tendrils happen to come in contact with a support, the friction causes them to coil round it."

Jamie pondered this.

"Ifn g'een fingers don' fin' anyfing to hold on to, do they keep g'owing wight up to th' sun?"

"They're not fingers, James. If there's nothing for them to grip, then they shrivel and die."

Jamie was sad for the pea-plant in its hopeless quest to get a grip on life and climb nearer the sun. Then he forgot it in his efforts to blow bigger and better spit-bubbles.

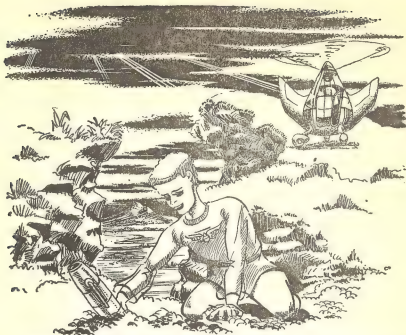
The nurse secretly took the pot, thrust it into a garbage slot. Dirty things to have around the nursery. She wondered who'd put it there on the sly. His mother, she supposed, during his sleep period. Should know better. Infringement of rules anyway to enter the nursery without permission. James was an awkward enough child without giving him such adscititious things to distract him from the path of learning. He was always finding fantastic metaphors and incorrect labels for the most commonplace objects. Backward in speech too, unlike his sister Chrome who'd pronounced her permitted vocabulary perfectly at eleven months.

AT eighteen months, his mathematics tutor looked at the graph paper he'd snatched from under Jamie's stylo.

A wavering but strangely firm circle, with radiants, above a horizontal.

"No co-ordinates. No... What is this anyway? It isn't an analysis."

"Sun," said Jamie dreamily. "Sun looking through the window, laughing at me."



"What are you talking about, boy? Your statement's without meaning, so I shan't examine it. And I remind you that this is not your draughtsmanship and design class. Even if it were, this"—he waved the paper—"this would mean nothing."

"Does everything have to mean something?"

Under his breath the tutor groaned in mock anguish: "Another reversionist."

WHEN Jamie was two, his nurse-mentor reported in writing to his parents: "As I informed you on your last visit to the nursery, James shows every sign of a reversion to the old child-norm despite all prescribed conditioning and instruction during his most formative period; and I am reluctant to pronounce him as fit to assume the responsibilities of family and social intercourse."

"However, my new house-pupil is due today and I must consider my duty to James at an end. He is, of course, a most lovable child, but I must beg you not to permit his charm to prevent you from doing your utmost to curb his predilection for fantasy and—I must say it—distortion of truth."

Georg Steel-Sec frowned at the letter. "She says you're a liar, Jamie."

Jamie was indignant. "I'm not. Sometimes I can't tell the whole of the truth as I see it because I haven't the words yet. But that's not lying. And anyway, it doesn't hurt anybody."

"But you are an untruther, young Jamie," said his sister Chrome with all the self-righteousness of her four years. "This morning you said there was a

little red man sitting on the bottom of my bed. And there wasn't."

Jamie mumbled: "Not my fault you couldn't see him."

Georg Steel-Sec shook his head. "No one minds you having day-dreams, Jamie lad. But don't project them. Have some consideration for other people whose regard for objective truth may be higher than yours. You've seven years to prepare for your first Estfod. Our family record is good. You won't uphold it if you examine yourself rather than the world. Introspection is the death of learning. It's not such a bad world that you should thus need to escape from it."

Matron Marion Steel-Sec, mother of Jamie, smiled. It was easy to see from whom Jamie had inherited his lively dark-blue eyes. "What a loose phrase, Georg," she murmured. "'Not a bad world.' Quite meaningless."

Georg was about to reply, decided not. Marion might not be as brilliant intellectually as his other wife, Mrs. Janet Steel-Sec. But her gentle wit and secret laughter disconcerted him in argument more easily than Janet's incisive and unemotional reasoning.

IT wasn't a bad world—for most.

Ancient prophets of sterile woe were forgotten even before a psychotic world had paradoxically regained sanity by an act of inspired madness—The Burning—in which the ashes of the old self-doomed cultures had been mixed with their end-product: atomic debris.

And in the rebirth, the ancient visionaries were finally confounded. Mechanical, social, administrative perfection did not bring the threatened sterility and stasis. Minds were freed to seek their full and sufficient beauty.

Conflict was sublimated in pure research, or in cultural rivalries which culminated periodically in Estfods—open competitions between communities and individuals with sinecure government posts as prizes.

Only in one respect would the old gloom-rakers have been correct. With reason now ruling, only functional, pragmatism was recognised. In maturing at last, men had lost the delights of unreason, of fantasy.

Except in the nurseries.

And here—during what were now recognised as the two most formative years of existence, when only specialists should have access to young, acutely-impressionable minds—the child was gently weaned from such atavistic introversion and set on the path of semantic exactitude.

Escape mechanisms were unnecessary now, said the psychos, and their demands must not be permitted to hinder mental development.

Escapism went the way of the vanished vermiform appendix.

Except in recalcitrants like Jamie.

HE was nine, with a few months to go before his first and most important Estfod, when he found the capsule.

He had enjoyed the intervening years far more than his tutors.

From Rome, his sixth-year mentor had written to Georg Steel-Sec in semi-humorous despair.

"He's more trouble than the other nine of my travelclass together. He wanders off alone every day—preferably slipping away unobserved in the middle of a lecture. He usually makes for the nearest pastoral community to talk with any of the inhabitants he can find who may not be at work. But

failing this, he'll beguile a citizen from productive labour, thus, of course, exacerbating his delinquency.

"Yesterday he even inveigled the councilhead of a community into a game of his own devising, played with small six-sided cubes marked with numerals. As a result, according to a tally they were keeping, this man owed Jamie his entire personal estate, including his wives, and a lien on his income for the next six months ! It appears, however, that the transaction was one which Jamie calls 'a pretend', meaning that it had no foundation in fact.

"When I reproved him for wasting the man's time in such idle and useless play, he replied 'The laws of chance are beautiful.' I asked him whether he didn't mean uncertainty principles. He said 'No. Chance is human. Uncertainty is statistical.'

"You see ? No referents ! No basis for correction ! And allied to his evasive attitude is a charm of bearing and speech that makes it difficult to be stern with him. After a recent truancy, when I'd pointed out the paralogisms and palpable sophistry of his excuses, he calmly handed me a bunch of wildflowers and said: 'They argue better than I can.'

"His records are before me as I write. But for their testimony, I'd say he's weakminded. But his natural intelligence index is well above average, his psychencephalog rating is sound, and his empathy quotient is high. Too high, perhaps. His self-imposed task at the moment is to persuade the local pastoral communities which prefer natural milk to the synthesised product to discard their machinery and milk the cows by hand because 'the cows prefer it' !

"His fellow-pupils complain that he relates wild tales of meetings with all manner of curious creatures; and when asked to adduce proof, his invariable reply is '*Close your eyes and look.*'

"You shouldn't conclude from all this that I'm an unsympathetic pedant, lacking in a sense of the humanities and aesthetics. We're all entitled to an inner life, but after we leave the nursery, we should endeavour to keep it to ourselves. Jamie blithely refuses to grow up in that respect."

FROM Buenos Aires, his seventh-year mentor had sent a picture of blue pampas and green mountains to his father, with the disgusted note: "This was done in architecture class."

Jamie's eighth-year mentor sent a poem—

A distillate of virgin souls
which filled a polythenic tube
in sparkle, squeeze and pulse
(chrysalis, nascent, unborn amid the stars,
a corybantic frieze, but muted,
an abruption from the spheres)
were caught in cloud and, slothing wearily
vapid, titrated in the alkaline mist,
they spilled their lifebreath
and with a choric cry
were one with naught.

"That," the tutor sarcastically commented "is Jamie's attempt at recapitulating what chemistry he has learned during the year. When told it meant nothing, he said 'Maybe not, but it sounds good if you read it aloud.'"

PLAGIARIST

Georg sighed, threw this latest report to Matron Marion. She read it, head tilted to one side. She smiled. "Jamie's been flitter-drifting over the prairie at night, watching the stars."

"Perhaps you can understand him," said Georg. "But don't ask me to."

JAMIE stood in the white, wide-arched corridor outside the lecture-room and looked down at the broad sweep of the River Thames, tinted pale gold by the slanting sun of a morning in early Spring.

He'd just transmitted his weekly letter to his mother and, as usual, was feeling homesickness pangs.

"Dear Marion: Pre-Estfod Year is a bore. Mainly recapitulation. Even London in Spring, with the pastel facades of its graceful university buildings mirrored for mile on mile in the ancient river (that sounds good—read it aloud !) doesn't reconcile me to work.

"Other pre-Estfod pupils are impressed by the atmosphere of great learning here—Janet admired it greatly, I'm told—she would !—but I can't savour the season of rebirth in a city, however beautiful. I'm thinking of our own summer home in the Ozarks—expect you're there by now—and nostalgia pricks deep.

"However, I scrounged some fuel for my flitter last night and—yes, you've guessed—I shall play hookey this afternoon. I shall drift down to the West. If I'm stopped, I can always say that I'm on my way to the Wales country, where—according to legend—the Estfod originated thousands of years ago. . . ."

But it was to the south-west that Jamie flitted that afternoon, swinging low and lazily over soft green pastureland with the smooth-humming vanes of his flitter making a wide halo above his head.

He rose a little to approximate his position by the distant coastline of the English Channel. Eleven miles inland, he guessed. A thousand feet below him was a curiously regular configuration of earthworks in the form of three roughly concentric ovals which encompassed perhaps 120 acres of raised ground.

He wondered if it were a natural feature. The rose-pink roofs of a small community showed nearby. He drifted down towards the outskirts, landed near a seat where a countryman was regulating the humidity panel of a field.

He folded his vanes. The man turned, smiled, said: "Maarnin' to 'ee. Graand it be, tew. Wer be fraam ?"

"Uh ?"

"Sorry, young'un. You're not local, then ? It's a preserved dialect."

Jamie smiled back. "I like it. From documents ?"

The countryman shook his head in wry wistfulness. "No, son. The Burning was pretty thorough. By word of mouth. But we've even retained some poetry."

Jamie's eyes gleamed. "Like to hear it sometime. But right now I'm interested in that place. Spotted it from the air. Is it natural ?"

"American, aren't you ? Student ?"

"Uh-huh."

The man got the humidity panel adjusted to his liking, turned to regard the vast earthworks. "No. It's not natural. Pre-Burning history," he said shortly, as if that explained all. "Still known around here as Madden or Maiden Castle. Nothing of interest there—unless you've a girl with you and

you're seeking quiet and a couch of soft turf. But you wouldn't be interested yet."

"Eh? I'm nine," Jamie said, mock-indignant.

They laughed together. The age of directness encompassed even children—though the ancients might not have regarded their formative period as a "childhood."

The countryman said: "Taking your first Estfod soon, I suppose. Going to try for a job?"

"Maybe."

"Good luck."

"Thanks. And goodbye. Think I'll take a look at your Maiden Castle. Perhaps I'll bring a girl next time." He strode off over the springy turf, turning to wave.

He scorned to use his flitter, scrambled easily up the sloping sixty-foot high outer earthwork. History mouldered unseen beneath his feet.

AS the countryman said, The Burning had been thorough, scientific—after the initial madness had passed away—accomplished with candor and iconoclastic enthusiasm. No thought, word or wrack of past-Grecian civilisation had been thought worthy of survival. Mankind was to be given a new, clean start.

There'd been much good in the old, it was admitted, but all, good and bad, was tainted with the indictment of failure: no cultures that harbored the germ of their own downfall could be honoured by posterity, and even their widest and most innocent ramifications were included in the overall responsibility for the final fission war.

The new builders didn't say history was the bunk. But they junked it, whole.

Even the so-called time-capsules had been sought with detectors, unearthed, destroyed.

But this had been done mainly on the basis of extant public records of their burial. And if an old, eccentric philanthropist and bibliophile named Sir George Hicks, in a final praiseworthy bid to achieve some kind of Butlerian immortality, had chosen to bury his own capsule, then there'd be no public record.

Especially since, in gaily ironical whim, he'd directed the burial of the molybdenum cylinder in a spot which for scores of years had been mapped, picked over, fretted at, dug up, filled in, combed and chivvied by generations of earnest archæologists, historians and students.

Layer by layer, historic detritus had been laid down by ancient Britons, Romans, Saxons, Celts, each adding their part to a natural fortification. Then layer by layer it had been removed for the edification of twentieth century science.

Of course, it may have been in an access of prophetic wisdom, rather than in mere whim, that Sir George had chosen Maiden Castle—hiding a needle not in a haystack but in a needle factory.

It remained undisturbed for centuries, since it was in a section that had been particularly well-combed of historic bric-a-brac; and there were no more archæological excavations at all after The Burning.

Jamie found it the hard way.

He stood at the brink of a steep bank, regarding the view. Winter gales and insistent south-west rains, balked by force-screen from affecting the cultivated fields below, had undercut the earth.

The brink gave way. He slid fifteen feet in an abruption of gravel, turf and dirt, landing up with one arm around the exposed end of the capsule—a happening so pat that Jamie took it as an omen.

He wiggled the cylinder until the full six feet of it came away in a further rush of gravel. It was bright, unpitted by the ages. The natural impulse was immediate.

A curious feeling of elation, of potential fulfilment, joined his normal boyish curiosity as he fined down a jet from the fuel chamber of his flitter, and began to cut.

A child who rescues and opens a sealed bottle from the seashore expects at very least a romantic tale of castaways, if not a full-sized genie. Here the anticipated romance, though of time, not the ocean, was of the same quality.

So Jamie was disappointed for a moment when he found the tiny microfilm reels. He'd have to wait until he could use his father's hobby-laboratory before he could examine the treasure properly.

The ethics—and legal aspect—of the matter he dismissed with a grin.

It was an extremely plump small boy who rose above the ramparts of the ancient earthwork under the laboring vanes of a flitter. Pockets, hip-pouches, booties, flying-pants and blouse bulged and sagged with the learning and works of the ancients, the contents of two great private libraries of literature and music.

Maybe the long-crumbled bones of Sir George Hicks, in his forgotten grave a few miles away, stirred at this fulfilment.

"YOU don't understand. You're just a girl." Jamie was pettish. He was immediately annoyed with himself for letting his sister see that she'd irritated him.

Chrome took breath to snap back, realised that she'd scored a little triumph. She smiled complacently.

"You're such a child, Jamie."

"Then why d'you want to walk with me? Go walk by yourself."

Jamie stared moodily out of the wall-sized window of their playroom, at the dark green conifers beyond the shielded belt of lawn around the summer home of the Steel-Secs.

He wanted to walk in the hushed depths of the wood, and think about the strangely beautiful things he'd been learning recently. Talk aloud, maybe. Couldn't do that with Chrome tagging along.

Chrome said: "I don't like walking in the woods alone."

"You don't like the woods at all. You're just trying to spoil my pleasure."

Chrome pulled her cap down firmly over her dark hair. "That's what I want to discover—what pleasure you do get from wandering in there. Anyway, if you don't take me, I'll tell Georg who broke that relay in the orcheston. And I expect," she added sweetly, "that he'd also like to know what sort of work you're doing in his laboratory that you have to be so secretive about—oh!"

She gasped. Jamie whirled from the window, dark-blue eyes wide in surprise and anger. He grabbed her wrists. "You've been spying on me you—you Goneril!"

She was taller, two years older. But his emotion frightened her.

"I haven't. I haven't, truly. Let me go!" She twisted her red-marked wrists from his grasp, backed towards the safety of the door, nearly crying. "But I'll tell now. You'll see." She turned and ran.

"Tell—and be damned!" Jamie wasn't sure what "damned" meant. It was one of his new words from the ancient microscripts. But it sounded very scathing.

He left the playroom, thoughts whirling, too preoccupied to remember the force-screen bounding the garden. It threw him back like a rubber membrane. He caught his heel, sat down with a thump. He opened his mouth for a cussword. Nothing came. Perjoratives weren't taught.

Chin in hand, he tried to think of something appropriate from his new learning. "Quote," he murmured "I do begin to have bloody thoughts. End quote."

Cold moisture from the turf made itself felt through his breeches. He sighed, scrambled up, went to the pedestalled switch that momentarily lifted a segment of the screen, and walked out into the dry, natural, unconditioned and—to Jamie—far sweeter air of the piney woods.

HE scuffed up pine needles with his feet. Rights of children were respected. His father, having given him permission to use the laboratory—ostensibly in connection with preparation for the Estfod, now only a few weeks away—wouldn't dream of violating his desire for secrecy, however much he might wonder at its purpose.

But the orchestron was another matter. The fabulously intricate and expensive composing-playing machine in its sound-proofed hall was operated as a rule only by Jamie and his mother, Matron Marion.

The other Steel-Secs, rather than feed formulae of their own devising into the orchestron, preferred to listen to the complex mathematical forms of the professional musicologists which could be accompanied on the stereo screens by complementary geometrical color-harmonies.

But sometimes Georg like to try out an amateur composition loaned by a friend. He'd get curious results if he tried it at present. The relay wasn't broken, just wired out of the circuit; but it had taken hours to fix and it would take longer to unfix.

Chrome had obviously seen him tinkering, and tried the instrument afterwards. She'd kept the information to herself until today, intending to use it in some way to coerce him into recognising her "superiority." Jamie snorted aloud. She'd tried that before.

It was to be her first Estfod too—minimum age for girls was eleven—and she was continually taunting him that her preliminary ratings were far higher. "You won't even be placed," she'd say. "You're lazy."

But he'd show her. Show everyone else too.

He sat, hands around knees, back against the bole of a pine at the edge of a shallow watercourse. If he slipped back home straight away, he mused, he might be able to put the instrument right before his father tested it. But then it wouldn't play his new music.

Mother Marion knew, anyway. She'd defend him, if necessary. His elfin face softened at the thought. She was—comfortable. She was

sympathetic, if not always completely understanding; a constant, gentle bulwark against the tacit demands of his other seniors.

SHE'D found him two days before, sprawled under the cover of the orchestra, holding a screwdriver, rubbing his already grubby chin in perplexity.

"It's too complicated," he explained. "I only want three parts, and it tries to orchestrate the lot and makes a terrible row."

She took the strip of film from the feeder. "I'm not surprised," she said after a moment. "You're giving the poor thing indigestion. These figures are totally unrelated."

"Mathematically, perhaps, but not musically."

"But that's a contradiction. If there's no recognised mathematical progression, it's not music."

"Not logical music, perhaps. But music. Fairy music."

He burrowed again. His voice was muffled. "When I've finished, it'll swallow that trio and like it. I'm cutting out part of the integrator. I want just a bass and two melodies in counterpoint to start with."

He emerged, ruffled, sat at the controls.

Despite the pitch—arbitrarily chosen by Jamie, and too high; the tempo, too fast; the stark electronic quality, minus overtones; and the absence of rubato—Beethoven might have recognised the first movement of his string trio in C minor, Opus 9, number 3.

Marion screwed up her pretty face. "It's ugly."

But she listened intently, trying to follow and correlate the interplay of vibrations with her trained mathematician's ear. "There is a pattern, I suppose," she said as the movement ended. "But it's difficult to discern it, despite the very limited frequency range."

"That's the chief charm of it for me—its apparent disorder," Jamie said. "Rules are made to be broken."

"But not in music, surely—the highest form of purely numerical expression. It's—unco-ordinated."

"Does it move you?" Jamie asked.

"It gives me a headache," said Marion, with a nuance of mock-indignation.

Jamie laughed. "Sorry. But that's because you've been taught that perfection lies in precision. You're trying to analyse it instead of just listening and—and feeling."

Marion asked him to play it again. She said thoughtfully: "Its disorder is more apparent than real. But it certainly wouldn't be popular. Why confine yourself to little more than half the audibility range and use only full or half-tones?"

"That's how it was written."

"Then it's not your own work?"

"Not exactly," Jamie answered carefully. It would be unfair to burden her with his secret. Penalty for failing to report a pre-Burning find was severe—ostracism for a year. "Call it a transcription," he said.

Then Marion had spotted a sheet on which he'd worked out the conversion values of the curious musical notation of the ancients—a more difficult task than transcribing their verbal script, which was readable at sight with a little practice.

He'd explained it as an experiment in musical shorthand. She had appeared

to accept that; but since, almost to a glance, it was a clumsy, space-wasting device, possibly she had her suspicions. But they'd cause her less uneasiness than the admitted truth.

JAMIE hoped his father wouldn't probe Chrome's babblings too closely. He got up, brushed pine-needles from his clothes, turned for home to—"face the music." He grinned. The old ones had had some useful phrases.

Chrome was waiting for him in the play-room, tensed to run if he were still angry. But Jamie was calm. He only shrugged when she said: "They're waiting for you. Family council. I warned you."

She tried to sound self-righteous, but she seemed afraid of what she'd done. She shrank away as Jamie walked to the door. He ignored her.

Family councils were rare and serious occasions, even in such a small unit as that of the Steel-Secs'.

Although his father sat at ease, flanked by Matron Marion and Mrs. Janet Steel-Sec, and spoke informally, there was an atmosphere of constraint in the big family-room.

Jamie felt a quirk of trepidation. Surely the orchestron didn't call for this amount of fuss. . . .

"Sit down, Jamie. We've heard something very disturbing about your activities."

Jamie looked at Marion. She shook her head slightly. She hadn't told. Georg noticed the movement, said: "We don't approve of the manner in which this has been brought to our attention. But if it's true, it's too serious to ignore. Where's your sister?"

Chrome had come silently into the room, tiptoed to a corner seat. She said meekly: "Here, Georg."

"Then come forward," he said sharply, with a tiny grimace of distaste that Jamie didn't miss. "You're not here as a spectator, to hide away in corners. You know the rules. Repeat what you told us about Jamie. He'll then have the right to deny—or justify."

Chrome stood, pink-faced, smoothing down her smock unnecessarily with hot hands. "I—that is, Jamie—"

"What's wrong with your tongue? It was loose enough a while ago."

Jamie sniffed audibly.

"Well, you see, he wouldn't take me into the woods with him this afternoon, and —and—"

"And you were annoyed, I suppose? I quite see. Aren't you supposed to be self-sufficient at your age, without wanting to attach yourself to your brother?"

"Oh, no—no it wasn't that," Chrome said hurriedly. "Only he's been acting in such a curious way lately that I became suspicious and I've been trying to find out what he was doing."

"Worse and worse," Georg murmured. "You were so concerned for the honor of this unit that you've been spying on him. And when he wouldn't make it easy for you to do just that. . . ."

Janet laid a hand on her husband's arm. "Really, Georg, you shouldn't speak to Chrome as though she were the culprit. It's out of order."

Georg sighed. "Well, let her proceed. And keep to the facts."

"Go on, Chrome," Janet said kindly. "Just repeat what you told us."

But Chrome, ready to be defiant, nerved to bear the mild contempt of both Georg and Jamie, couldn't withstand the sympathy of Janet Steel-Sec. She broke into tears—unusual in even the smallest child of the era.

So unusual, it thoroughly embarrassed the adults.

"Oh, Lord." Jamie breathed the archaism to himself. But he wasn't embarrassed. Tears were frequent in the old microscript tales. He'd even felt a salty prickle in his own eyes while reading or even, for no reason at all, while looking at the disordered beauties of a hill-country sunset.

And his quick young heart went out to his sister in a way he couldn't define. Men and women were supposed to be equals in every practicable way, he knew, but—girls were queer sometimes. They couldn't help it. Chrome probably hadn't meant to be mean. . . .

Impulsively he got up, put a comforting arm round her shoulders, led her to the door. "Don't worry," he said. "I'll tell them. I don't mind."

This magnanimity was too confusing for Chrome's emotional comprehension.

She gave Jamie a puzzled little half-smile through her tears and went off to her room to wonder about the queerness of boys.

She finally decided she should have kicked his shins for trying to make her feel grateful.

Georg regarded his son with a curious light in his eyes.

"He'll either be a great man—or a great fool," he said softly, to no one.

Jamie came back, sat down, asked bluntly: "What did she tell you?"

It seemed she'd told—plenty. For a moment, as his father was speaking, Jamie almost regretted his kindness; then he shrugged mentally.

Piqued by her exclusion from his "secret" she'd evidently sneaked into that section of the laboratory which had been set aside for his private use. She had not understood most of what she'd seen. But Georg had deduced the truth from her descriptions. Compared with this, the sabotage of the orchestron was a minor matter.

But Georg respected the statutory rights of responsible children. He'd not yet investigated for himself.

"With your permission, Jamie," he said, "we'll now visit the laboratory. You needn't say anything yet."

He walked on ahead with Janet. Marion gave Jamie's hand a quick squeeze.

GEORG silently inspected the array of microscripts, Jamie's transliterations and the musical "shorthand," all neatly arranged and classified.

He picked up a reel from an as-yet unexamined pile of 'scripts. He replaced it and, unconsciously, wiped his fingers on his tunic.

Detestation of the mad, unordered, suicidal past of mankind wasn't indocrinated. It was innate. The Burning, spontaneous at first, then purposively directed, had set up a mass psychological block among the civilized majority. Man, reborn, shuddered at the chaos of the womb. Conveniently, there was a selective amnesia. And, unlike the individual amnesiac, mankind fought not to remember, but to forget.

Georg said slowly, regarding the evidence of hard, devoted work: "If only you'd shown the same application to your prescribed pre-Estfod curriculum, this couldn't have happened."

Both Janet and Marion, despite themselves, were intrigued by a set of color enlargements which Jamie had made experimentally from a reel entitled "A Century of Fashion's Foibles."

Sir George Hicks' tastes had been both catholic and eclectic, exoteric and esoteric. He was both acute scholar and boisterous, broadminded beef-eater—a paradox that his wife, Lady Hicks, had never resolved.

Marion and Janet, arrayed for comfort not dubious concealment, couldn't restrain amused, whispered comment at the pictures of ancient feminine outerwear.

Georg frowned at them. They turned away hurriedly.

He asked Jamie: "Where did you find the capsule?"

Jamie told him.

"You knew you should report it?" Georg had been half-hoping that Chrome's tale was untrue. His voice was grave. "Or at least, if you had qualms about doing that, leave it to be discovered by someone with a greater sense of duty to the community? Instead, you smuggle the pernicious stuff beneath our very roof! Now it devolves on me to inform the authorities, and the whole unit may be ostracised."

Marion gasped.

Jamie said quickly: "That won't be necessary. You could disown me."

"That's meaningless. We don't 'own' you. You are your own man. But you certainly won't enter the Estfod under the aegis of our unit name. I'll strike it off the entries today. If you think you have the slightest chance, after wasting your time with this sort of thing, you can enter under a chosen name." He turned to the women. "You agree, of course?"

Marion said: "Perhaps you—" then stopped short, and deferred to his judgement with a nod. Sex equality was more honoured in spirit than in fact, in unit relationships.

Janet asked: "Do you intend to inform?"

"Of course not. Jamie will put these things together and bring them to me tomorrow morning for destruction. We'll deal with it as a unit not a community matter." He paused in the doorway. "I can forgive deception, Jamie. But not bad taste."

Janet left the laboratory with him.

"How does he know it's 'bad taste'?" Jamie said indignantly to his mother. "He hasn't read any of it."

"You're fortunate the consequences haven't been more serious. Leave it at that," Marion said, dutifully stern. "I suppose that music you were playing the other day came from here?"

"Yes. And you know you liked it, in a sort of way. Not all that the ancients did was evil, surely?"

"I don't know, Jamie. I haven't thought much about the matter. Janet is the psychosociologist, not I. Do as Georg says. In practice, he's usually right."

HER self-deprecatory tone annoyed Jamie. "There's a deal of difference between expedience and moral right. Or perhaps you wouldn't wish to argue with Georg about that?"

Her brow furrowed. Jamie folded his arms, a truculent, challenging little guardian of his proscribed treasures. A puzzling boy. She understood him better than Georg. But. . . .

"You should know that I don't argue. That's not cowardice. It's tolerance. And—with respect to Georg—a sense of humor."

"All's for the best in this best of all possible worlds," Jamie murmured, groping in the bran-bag of his new-found knowledge. "Voltaire's Pangloss would have been happy." He leaned against the bench. "There's nothing more intolerable than easy tolerance," he added moodily. "I almost wish Georg had reported me."

To his surprise, Marion laughed. "Tell that to Chrome when you wish her goodnight. About tolerance, I mean. I expect she's very annoyed with you by now."

"But why should she be—" Jamie began. But Marion, smiling, had left him.

HE walked down the bench, fingering his treasures reflectively. He picked up a sheaf of his latest enlargements, began automatically to clip them in order. A passage caught his eye—

"... but man, proud man,
Drest in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd,
His glassy essence, like an angry ape,
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As make the angels weep."

He mouthed the words softly, waiting for their sense to penetrate—sense which seemed to come not from mere verbal precision, but from the swing and flow and roll of their juxtaposition.

Aloud, he commented: "'Glassy essence' What does it mean? Nothing, you'd say."

In imagination, his father stood before him. No—a whole audience of people like his father, and he was addressing them.

"It means nothing—but it means everything. And there are no words to replace then. Yet with your analytical minds, enfeebled to the glories of metaphor, you'd seek mere synonyms. What would you say—'siliceous distillation' perhaps? You'd look so hard for a meaning that it would, in truth, become meaningless. You would—pah!"

He gave up trying to make them understand. The audience faded.

L'esprit d'escalier was all very well, but he hadn't in fact attempted to defend his attitude to his father. Now it was too late. The edict: destruction of his treasures. The further edict—entry to the Estfod under a chosen name instead of that of the family unit—was a trifling matter. He'd had no intention of trying for an administrative post anyway. A place in an agricultural community, where he would live his work rather than work for his living, was his aim; and no Estfod rating was necessary.

But the contents of the capsule mustn't be destroyed. They might not contain true wisdom, but they enshrined a curious beauty. He'd raised them from the dust of ages, and he couldn't stand by and see them reduced to dust in a vibro-incinerator.

He made his preparations.

Marion noticed a restrained glint of excitement in his eyes when he went to bid the three adults a polite goodnight before going to his own room. She asked no questions.

From his window, Jamie looked long at the piney woods etched black against a sky of deepening rose, heard in his mind the whisper of the first night breeze among the branches, saw the clear stars come into their own. It would be strange out there beyond the house-screen at night. Uncomfortable, maybe. But he'd feel closer to those ancients. They might not have understood the secrets of nature, but they enjoyed them. There was joy in mystery.

He set his chronometer to wake him in two hours' time, and slept.

IN the morning, Georg said: "It's not in my nature to be suspicious, but I don't see how Jamie could have done this without assistance in so short a time—fueling the 'copter, loading all that rubbish of his, some of my instruments, two power-packs, bedding, fuel, clothes; then manhandling the machine beyond the screen before taking off."

"You're suggesting I helped him?" asked Marion.

"I think you knew last night he intended to do this."

"I knew no more than you. He looked excited. I might have guessed."

"Yet you said nothing. Do you approve of his action?"

"No. But I understand it. Didn't you ever want to run away, as a child?"

Georg was genuinely puzzled. "Run away? From what?"

"Just—run away. From the adult world, perhaps. Away from people who can't dream. Jamie didn't need help. It's amazing what energy a child can put into such an enterprise."

"Why speak of him constantly as a child? He's old enough to be a responsible member of the unit and the community. I dealt with him as such. Yet he behaves as if I'd threatened him with corporal punishment." Georg grimaced at the thought. "There's no reason for it."

"Jamie's mind isn't conditioned exclusively by reason. That's why he's more of a child than you realise. And less of a child too, perhaps. You expected him to accept without question or explanation the adult view that the material from the capsule should be destroyed for the good of the community."

"Great Semantics!" Georg's voice rose. "Should it be necessary to explain that? He's been educated, hasn't he?"

Marion said firmly: "He's been told, not educated. We can't expect children like Jamie to accept such adult dicta without question. It's like telling a child not to put its finger behind a jet orifice and not explaining why. At the first opportunity, it'll burn its finger."

"Now you're denigrating the entire educational system."

"Only with reference to one subject and to students like Jamie. We know The Burning was good. But Jamie must be told why."

Georg grappled with an unfamiliar idea, trying to remain calm despite innate repugnance to the subject. "That's impossible," he said at last. "To examine why men were once little better than beasts might reintroduce those very mental factors which brought them to that state. The Burning wasn't dictated by one man, or even a group. It was decreed by the collective wisdom of a world suddenly become sane. To examine sanity is to court it. Jamie and others like him—very few I believe, fortunately—must adapt themselves to the community, not expect the community to adapt to them."

Georg remembered his own comment that Jamie would be either a great fool or a great man. Its vagueness now irritated him. How define either

"great" or "fool" save by reference to the community? And if Jamie didn't fit. . . .

Georg sighed, gave way to another vagueness: "If only Jamie were a normal boy—"

"I believe," said Marion with one of her secret smiles, "that that's precisely what he is."

Georg refrained from questioning that. He asked: "Where do you think he is? That machine has a two-thousand-mile range."

Her husband, Marion reflected, looked rather like a boy himself at that moment. A worried boy. He was, indeed, young. Pity that so much of the easy spirit of youth was occluded by the constraints of early maturity in a mature world.

"Will you look for him?"

"No." Georg was suddenly quite adult again. He was very fond of Jamie, but—"The answer to one irrational act is not another," he said. "I tried to save him from his foolishness. If he insists on inviting ostracism, he can do it alone."

But later, alone in his office in the building of the District Barter Association, he put in several private calls to relations and friends, enquiring casually whether they had seen Jamie. None had.

On returning to the summer home in the afternoon—in a hired 'copter—he found Marion waiting for him with a note.

She said: "Jamie set the 'copter down just outside the screen. Janet and Chrome were in the garden. He waved to them and ran off into the woods before they could reach the machine. This was on the seat."

It read: "Returned with thanks. I needed it to carry my things. I'm not far away, but it would take you a long time to find me. I don't suppose you want to, anyway. See you at Estfod. My chosen name will be William Beethoven Whitman. I'm quite comfortable, for a couple of weeks."

THAT wasn't strictly true. On previous excursions Jamie had discovered a natural bower in the side of a gully, hollowed out by rain beneath the spreading roots of one of the few deciduous trees in the district.

It was damp and dirty. He dried it out with infra-red from one of the power-packs, but had to resign himself to the dirt and to the tiny things that crawled into the warm interstices of his bedding. He obtained water from a rill in the bed of the gully, sterilising it with a small sonic generator.

He rigged two powerful lights, screened by bedding during darkness, and worked far into the night to complete his fascinating task of enlarging and classifying the microscript material.

He'd have worked much faster despite all practical difficulties, if he could have refrained from close examination.

But a glance would draw him inexorably into realms of fantasy and speculation, of faery poetry, of majestic, thundering prose.

He spent two hours over a set of color prints of paintings, puzzled at first by what appeared to be disorderly masses of color unrelated to any given chromatic scale, then intrigued as he began to divine the impressionistic, evocative technique.

On the third day, Jamie realised, reluctantly, that it would take years to examine everything thoroughly. And he was nearly out of copying film.

For the purpose he had in mind he'd have to make a selection, as representative as possible, on the basis of what he'd already learned.

THE year's Regional Estfod was held in a semi-natural shielded amphitheatre in red sandstone country. Half a million could view the proceedings on magna-screen from the comfort of their own 'copters or from the tiered sit-easies.

At an outer check-point, a steward looked down at the hot dust-begrimed figure of a small boy. "'Copter-check?"

Jamie said: "No. I hitched to the nearest centre, then hoofed it."

"You—what?" Nearest centre was five miles.

"Walked. Ever heard of it? You put one foot in front of the other—like this. Envoys," Jamie added enigmatically, "always walk the last lap." He eased the pack on his bruised shoulders. "Where's District Four Administration?"

"The blue structure in that row. Follow the pathway of the same color. But—excuse me—don't you think it would be wise to clean up a little before you report?"

Jamie grinned. "That can wait." He headed for the blue building at the far side of a wide, paved plaza.

It was early in the day. Only a few entrants, mostly of his own age—first timers—had arrived. They stood chatting in groups. Some had already donned the coloured distinguishing robes of their districts.

Jamie deliberately left the straight blue path and walked on the neutral grey paving. He recognised a yellow-robed girl from his fifth-year class. She saw him, was about to speak, then turned away suddenly, head high.

She'd probably remembered a story he once told her of his escapades in a rural community. She'd listened wide-eyed for a while then, as his invention grew wilder, had interrupted: "But it just can't be true—jumping over houses on a cow and talking to a horse!" And Jamie, with scorn well-practised on sister Chrome, had replied: "Of course it's not true, but it's exciting." The incomprehension on her little face had changed to a faint disgust. Jamie chuckled at the memory.

He paused for a steadying breath at the entrance to the building. If there was a hitch now—

There was none at the beginning of the interview, apart from the look of puzzled distaste on the face of the district organiser at his dishevelled clothes.

Jamie dumped his burden without ceremony. Sand trickled from the shoulder-pack on to the carpet. "I 'statted my revised entry a week ago. District Four. Chosen name, William Beethoven Whitman."

"Yes. I saw it." The blue gowned organiser hesitated, drew a card from a desk file. "Tell me—why did you alter your entry? Your birth patronymic is an honoured one in our district."

"My business," said Jamie shortly. "Is my entry legal?"

So his father hadn't "disowned" him. For some reason that annoyed Jamie.

"Quite in order. As an individual entry, do you want your points credited to the district?"

"No."

The organiser shrugged, made a mark on the translucent card. "And you wish to enter all solo classes—adult and pre-adult—and you don't want your

accretion of points entered in the competitive scale for governmental appointments?"

"No again. Don't you see this chip on my shoulder?"

The administrator peered, shook his head. A three-inch sand-lizard chose that moment to escape from the warm dungeon of Jamie's hip-pocket. It blinked, then with claws a-splay, scuttled down his leg into the shadow of the organiser's desk.

Jamie scrambled for it. His muffled voice came from under the desk. "Sorry . . . C'mere Horace. Don't get scared or you'll lose that tail."

He stood up, stuffed the disgruntled lizard back into his pocket.

The organiser gulped. "I think that's all, Mister—er—Whitman. You'll find the schedule on the notice-board outside."

Jamie departed, whistling. The organiser took a deep, thankful breath.

Georg Steel-Sec came from an adjoining room, smiling. "I warned you."

"I don't understand the lad."

"Neither do I. But his mother tells me he's a genius. And I never argue with my wives."

The organiser looked down at his desk, fiddled with a stylo. "Corporal correction is out of the question I suppose?"

"Great Semanticos, yes! Not that Jamie would report me if I resorted to it. But I'd go down in his estimation. And somehow I wouldn't like that."

THE amphitheatre was filling. Jamie checked that all solo competitions were confined to the first day. District group efforts—choral, dramatic and terpsichorean—were spread over the remaining two days.

He dumped his pack and, after a wash, looked at some of the graphic-arts entries in the booths rimming the amphitheatre.

He was depressed by the stark accuracy of perspective, the dull permutations of standard color-scales. Some of the spray painting in depth were highly imaginative, but in a circumscribed manner—conventional interpretations rather than extensions of reality. He wished he'd had time to adapt the impressionistic technique of the ancients to depth form.

But maybe he'd taken on enough already: free-theme poetry, self-accompanied song, orchestron composition, dramatic declamation—

"Nervous, Jamie?"

Mother Marion, slender in a pearl-grey gown, distinctive among the multicolored partisan gowns of other pre-judgement viewers in the booth, touched his shoulder. Jamie flushed in sudden pleasure.

"How did you—?"

"I've collected a strabisbus watching for you through binoculars from our sit-easies. Georg waited for you in the district office."

"Didn't see him."

"He probably thought you wouldn't want to, and kept out of sight. He said you looked well. You do." Her dark eyes were anxious. "But don't you think you're being a little too romantic about this business?"

"No, Marion. I have to tackle this alone now. But—I'm glad I've seen you."

"And you're not nervous?"

"A little. But I won't be if I know you're rooting for me."

"If I'm what?"

"Pressing the 'unconditional applause' button on your sit-easy."

Marion wanted to run her fingers through the dark disordered hair of her son as he smiled up at her. But it might embarrass him.

She said: "Can't promise to do that, Jamie—unless you deserve it, of course. And even if you do badly, I shan't mind, so long as you believe in yourself. Look us up soon, won't you?"

And with a smile that stayed in his mind for a long time, Marion was gone in a graceful swirl of pearl-grey fabric.

Jamie felt empty. The trudge to Estfod had made him hungry. But it wasn't that kind of emptiness.

Half an hour to go before the competitions began. Poetry first. And he was one against the rest. No. That was romanticising. Marion was right. Romanticism didn't befit him anyway, because he could laugh at himself. And heroes never did that.

He stepped outside the booth. Beyond the amphitheatre screen was a range of blue-hazed mountains. He wanted to be there, soothed by their stillness. He wanted to be back in his hideout, despite the damp and the bugs and the beetles. He wanted to be back where he'd found the capsule, swinging low over the sweet green English pastures. He wanted to be—

Most anyplace but where he was.

"Sure I'm nervous," he admitted aloud. He collected his precious pack, wandered down the S-ramp to the compartmented terrace where the competitors, mainly young—and all except Jamie in the colored robes of their districts—were waiting for their names to be called.

From there, they would walk down a straight ramp to the stage before the dais at which the specialist judges sat immediately under the towering magna-screen.

A mechanic was acting as stand-in while the scanners were focused. A white-overalled midget himself, his image in depth suddenly towered fifty feet above him, mimicking his every gesture, reflected in the millions of hair-like wires comprising the screen.

Jamie shivered. Pity the screen couldn't boost the ego in ratio with that monstrous life-like figure. It looked as if it might easily bend and crush the tiny gesticulating simulacrum at its feet.

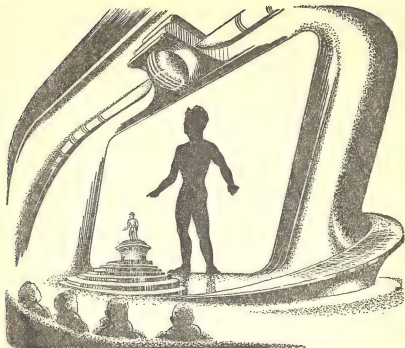
But no—the simulacrum was the master—a midget controlling a puppet a thousand times its own size. And if your image could step out, devastatingly real, still under your control—

Jamie looked away, grinning at his riotous fancies. One day he'd learn to keep them under control. He saw Chrome, realised that, almost unconsciously, he'd been looking for her.

SHE was talking with a group of District Four competitors. He went up to them. Words were difficult. He just looked. Her grey eyes engaged his. For a moment, it seemed she might smile. Then she remembered his infuriating magnanimity.

She glanced away, her small pink face tilted back. "I hope," she said distantly "that you've observed correct procedure, Jamie. I see you're not wearing the Ozark robe. Not that it really matters what you do as far as the Steel-Sec unit is concerned."

And he'd wanted to be friends. It hurt.



Impulsively, Jamie blurted: "Speak for yourself, pug-nose."

One of the girls in the group giggled. Chrome's face flushed scarlet.

Jamie regretted the words straight away. Because although Chrome did have a pug-nose—now shining like a little red beacon—he was fond of her.

He didn't remind himself that he was also fond of most anything that lived and breathed and was itself.

He said: "I'm sorry."

And that was too much for Chrome. He was being magnanimous again! Equally on impulse, and forgetting her desire to give an impression of grown-upness to the others, she hefted her blue robe for clearance and became a primitive young animal.

The kick landed, hard. Jamie yelped, as much with surprise as pain. He backed away, squatted tailor-fashion—a natural, quite dignified movement with him—and rubbed his grazed leg.

Chrome had shocked herself. She stood, hand over mouth, eyes wide in sudden dismay. The group was silent. There was something vaguely indecent about violence.

Jamie sensed the constraint. He, at least, could appreciate his sister's action. It even made him feel more fond of her.

He laughed. "Didn't think you had it in you."

Disapproval of the group was soon directed to him alone again. Horace, the sand-lizard, made another break for freedom. He plopped, heavy-fleshed, on the paving, scuttled for cover.

A flurry of robes and scuffle of feet from the startled group put extra speed

into his claws. He escaped into a sandstone gully behind the terrace.

Jamie thoughtfully said: "Damn," but made no recapture attempt. "Guess he deserves to get away."

"Little barbarian," a youth muttered to Chrome. "Hardly blame you for losing your temper with him."

"Annexe for unattached competitors," said another of the group pointedly, "is further down the terrace."

Jamie got up. He said: "Good luck, Chrome."

She turned away.

A SHORT acclamatory orchestron piece opened the Estfod. Keyboard and player sank back to a chamber beneath the stage and with no further ceremony, the judges of free-theme poetry filed to their places on the dais.

Adults and second Estfodders had been given age precedence. Together they numbered only fifteen. Group events were more popular with adults than individual competitions.

Jamie calculated he had two hours to kill. He wandered down from the terrace backstage, found the technician in charge of the gigantic festival orchestron.

The man was an enthusiast. Jamie's ability to engage in highly technical conversation intrigued him. He rhapsodised about the complexity of the machine and, implicitly, his own mastery of the circuits.

"Something like this?" Jamie handed over a formalised diagram.

"Yes. But there's three stages missing here."

"Couldn't fool you," Jamie said admiringly. "Would it take you long to short them?"

"But that introduces imperfections."

"Not the way I see it. Look—"

Jamie argued. The man was a technician, not a musicologist. Finally he admitted he could—and agreed he would—make the changes at short notice when he heard Jamie's chosen name announced.

Jamie came up from the comparative behind-scenes gloom to the sunlit terrace, sat down. He tried to stifle growing apprehension.

Wouldn't do for an ambassador to have stage-fright. That was his job, he told himself for the hundredth time—an ambassador. A representative of the ancients who'd been scorned, discarded with contumely, forgotten, good with bad. Great hearts and minds deprived of their shining immortality by the whim of a hurt world, relegated finally to dust.

And only through him, an insignificant boy, might they live again. Frightening responsibility. But it was queer how he could feel both scared and exultant. As if he'd been dedicated. . . .

With part of his mind, Jamie appraised the efforts of the latest competitor, a yellow-gowned girl fifty feet high with voice amplified to match, declaiming in impeccable trochaic metres—a clever weave of trimeter, tetrameter and eight-foot—about a holiday trip to Venus.

The six judges—he could just discern their expressions from his vantage-point—were obviously pleased with the cunning way she worked in details of fuel-passenger-cargo ratios, ionisation rates, astrogation co-ordinates, intensely interesting comparative statistics on bearing-loads of different types of engine, and biochemical and botanical data on air-purifying systems.

Jamie's ironical view of the piece was that the decibel-measured hum of mechanical applause from the sit-easies round the amphitheatre—taken into account by the judges—might have been greater if the girl hadn't ended so lamely with the dull and irrelevant information that there were seventy passengers aboard the ship and that one of them, a woman colonist, had given birth to a boy weighing eight pounds.

It was the only part that interested Jamie. He wondered offhandedly what they'd named the space-baby.

THE last competitor in that class bowed his way from the stage. First Estfod competitors were alerted. Jamie was glad he was low in the list, alphabetically. Chrome would come first.

Chrome's verse, in unvaried iambic hexameter, concerned itself with some aspects of recent meteorological research.

It received a gratifying volume of applause.

The stage-side amplifier whispered: "William Beethoven Whitman."

Jamie almost ran down the ramp. He didn't want time for last-minute doubts about his selection.

"Extracts from longer works," he announced. "Theme—the dignity of Man and the mystery of his Being."

After half-a-dozen selections, with only the slightest pause between each, he came to his last passage.

I am he that walks with the tender and growing night

I call to the earth and sea half-held by the night.

Press close, bare-bosom'd night—press close

magnetic nourishing night !

Night of south winds—night of the few large stars !

Still nodding night—mad naked summer night.

The silence from the amphitheatre when he finished was like a physical blow. His stomach seemed to curl into a tight, unmoving ball.

He could hear the puzzled, interrogative whispers of the judges behind him. He turned, bowed formally to them, walked off, a pale, stiff little figure.

He blinked hard, twice. That was that. But—he'd show them yet.

A competitor touched his arm. "Was that gibberish intended as a joke?"

Jamie looked at him, tight-lipped. He said: "Idiot." He walked back up to the terrace.

THE poetry judges left the dais to correlate their findings for later announcement, and the adjudicators for self-accompanied song took their places.

Jamie's emptiness had become a physical pang, but he still couldn't face food.

He sat doggedly, almost unmoving, until his turn was announced.

He had chosen a combined work—verse of an ancient playwright set to music by a later composer. The orchestron needed none of his special adjustments for simple accompaniment on a single manual.

The sound engineer hurriedly boosted output to make Jamie's subdued announcement audible.

"—of a mythical creature, a sprite or spirit, on promise of its release from bondage to a scientist or so-called 'magician'—"

As Jamie took his seat, his ears, hypersensitive from tension, caught the whispering of the judges.

"—the one whose poetry was quite incomprehensible. . ."

"And what in the name of reason is he blathering about now?"

"Silence, please"—from the chairman—"The lad must have a hearing."

Jamie struck the keys almost savagely, but after the initial chords he moderated his touch in character with the aery nature of the song. His accurate, pure, bell-like treble rang out—

"Where the bee sucks, there suck I:

In a cowslip's bell I lie;

There I couch when owls do cry—"

He went through the song with its musically-necessary repetitions, modulated it, came back to the original key—

"Merrily, merrily, shall I live now

Under the blossom that hangs on the bough."

This time, there was applause—low and obviously hesitant. The musical mode was strange and the words seeming-nonsense. But the boy certainly had a voice.

"Wasted," murmured a judge as Jamie bowed to the dais. "Quite wasted. A pity."

Better, thought Jamie. He felt sure Mother Marion had been among those applauding. If only he could have the whole day to recite, sing and play to them. . . .

HE went to one of the rural-craft stalls, impatiently stilled his insistent hunger with honeycomb and milk. He didn't want to listen to the remaining song-competitors or to the opening of the orchestron class.

He feared distraction from his purpose, feared that his pragmatism education, despite his enlightenment, might reassert itself and he'd find himself admiring cultural criteria that, consciously, he now despised.

Stomach still taut, as if in fear of a blow, Jamie returned to the competitors' terrace.

The musicologist judges, and the majority of the audience, were listening with intrigued attention to the stark logical development of an overture on the theme of a certain cosmological equation.

The composition brought in a daring passage which indicated a false assumption—a confusion between kinematical and absolute temporal values. It brought frowns to the faces of the judges.

But, Jamie noted, they smiled with relief when the composer, a green-gowned youth, restored the correct equation in an intricate atonal fugue and juggled the remaining basics into a triumphal, impeccably accurate finale.

The musicologists were sufficiently impressed with the piece to venture an immediate judgement. They took off only a few points for the inaccurate passage, presumably because it had been so swiftly and humorously corrected.

The chairman made it clear that, in their view, accuracy should not be deprecated, even when the intention was that it might be reasserted to greater effect.

If that was their attitude . . . Jamie shrugged. He was more interested in the audience than the specialist judges.

He took his time when his name was called, forcing calm. He riffed along the seven manuals in turn. Second and third stages had been cut. The technician had kept his word. Jamie breathed relief. He fed the co-ordinator with the plastic strips of his prepared score.

"Manual control over tempo, expression and quality only," he announced. "A non-descriptive piece extracted from a symphonic work, using five sets of variables with limited frequency range."

The first notes swelled into the amphitheatre.

It may have been a vocal extension of the vivid fantasies which Jamie had never learned to control, welling up from his own subconscious; but the voice was real to Jamie, even to its quality.

A soft, kindly voice: "Slower, my son; then as passionate avowal grows, bring up that secondary theme and hasten the whole."

Jamie's careful and loving fingers, and the scanned strips, managed an interpretation of the second movement of the Seventh Symphony of Ludwig van Beethoven that even that reputedly-irascible but great-hearted genius might have been proud to acknowledge.

Jamie knew it. And he felt sure that, somehow, somewhere, it had been so acknowledged.

He'd finished within the time limit. His hands fell to his knees.

Surely they'd understand it . . . Surely they couldn't keep silence after that. He held his breath.

The audience weren't silent. They had been aurally affronted by music which alternately raised their hopes of logical resolution then dashed them. They gave the negation of applause. A dissonant burring noise.

Jamie was sick with resentment. His voice boomed into the amphitheatre: "I don't give a purple damn whether you like it or not! You—"

His voice was cut off.

The judges argued. One, a thoughtful young man whose summer home was in mountain country, said: "Barbarous perhaps. But there's something in it that escaped me. Maybe if we had it again—"

"Not now," said another hastily. "Consensus of opinion is that this competitor needs psychological treatment. He wouldn't have appeared again today if the rules could have been interpreted to debar him."

BUT Jamie was to appear again. With finality. The shadows of the far mountains stretched purple among the foothills and the westering sun was low as he came on to the stage for his declamation.

Others had chosen mainly sociological themes for their short oratory. But Jamie had a bigger bone to pick.

Results of the other events had already been announced. He had scored the least points in each. His only shred of encouragement had been when the young musicologist, dissenting from the majority judgement, had stated that Jamie's music was, perhaps, "too radically new for immediate appraisal; and I would reserve my opinion until I have heard further examples. He might be well-advised to temper the impact of his experimentation by employing the more-accepted modes as a framework."

Too new! That was a laugh.

From the corner of an eye, Jamie saw his figure loom large in the magnascreen. He faced the amphitheatre.

"I have no oratory prepared," he said, "no set, carefully-phrased speech acclaiming the glories of this age. For me, they do not exist. This culture is founded on falsity, on the denial of all beauty unless it has observable referents.

"But a culture that denies the free play of minds unfettered by the bondage

of exact meaning is denying the only semantic difference between man and the higher primates—imagination. And without that, beauty is sterile.”

He glanced back quickly at the judges. They were muttering together. He'd have to speed it up.

“Today I gave you fantasy, strange beauty wrought by words forced to transcend their own limitations. But you scorned it because your minds are in chains, disciplined to regard words as invariables—”

That was telling 'em!—denunciatory terms were flowing coherently through his mind almost faster than he could express them—

“For science, seeking ultimate truth, such verbal discipline is necessary. For art, seeking ultimate beauty, it is crippling.”

Now for it. Jamie took a deep breath, raised his voice.

“Once there were men who understood and cherished the power and mystery of words and the musical counterparts of words. And because I have tried to achieve and share that understanding, I shall be branded as a criminal.”

A quarter of a mile from the stage, Georg Steel-Sec, face white, half-rose from his sit-easy in sudden agonised realisation. “Can't they stop the young idiot?” he groaned. Beside him, Marion was relaxed, almost limp. With the intuition that Jamie had inherited, she had sensed the inevitability of something like this throughout the day. Resignation had drained her of most emotion. But there was a strange, quiet hint of pride on her lovely face as she watched the screen.

“Those works you heard today,” cried the fifty-foot image of Jamie, “were not my own. They were from the pre-Burning era! Is it a crime to rescue such beauty? No! It's you who are the criminals—”

One of the judges made frantic signals to a technician.

Behind Jamie, the magna-screen blanked.

To the spectators in the vast expanse of amphitheatre, Jamie suddenly became a tiny, insignificant, inaudible figure.

He heard the sound-feedback from the amplifiers fade, realised what had happened.

“Criminals!” he shouted, with all the shrill power of his lungs. “Murderers—you've murdered the past—murdered your own heritage—”

A judge came up and took Jamie gently but very firmly by the arm.

WITH moonlight making a halo of its vanes, a flitter descended to a feather-landing on an inner rampart of an ancient earthwork in southern England. A small boy shucked its harness, sprawled on the mist-damp grass, chin in hand.

He'd felt a curious compulsion to return to Maiden Castle. It was lonely. But almost anywhere was lonely for Jamie, socially ostracised for two years.

A year for failing to report his find and—with an irony that brought a wry smile to his lips—a year for plagiarism: submitting work to the Estfod which was not of his own composition.

He could stand ostracism. But the complete failure of his mission was harder to bear.

Softly, to the night air, he said: “I'm sorry. It's too late, I guess.”

He listened hard. His imagination didn't fail him. Or perhaps the reply actually came, by some strange physics of affinity; for there was no time, death or distance in Jamie's personal wonderland, and what can be imagined, can be—

It came in the voice he'd heard as he played the ancient symphony at the Estfod.

"Too soon, not too late . . . not yet . . . not yet . . .

Men will grow young again, with fuller wisdom, and then—"

Jamie sat up. Not yet. And—not here?

He looked at the skies. He saw a bright diamond beyond the moon.

JAMIE wiped streaming sweat from his forehead. The leaves of the giant trees ringing the glade drooped in the never-ending heat.

He swiped ineffectually at an enormous winged insect.

He looked at his pupil who stood eager for praise in front of the squatting class.

"Not bad, Y'runi," he said. "Try it again, and this time pay more attention to the plosives."

That was the main trouble with Venusians—they found the plosives difficult.

But they had magnificent voices otherwise. And anyway, they were very enthusiastic and put a lot of expression into it.

Y'runi moistened the orifice that served him as a mouth, and tried again.

"To ve or not to ve: that is the question:

Whether 'tis novler in the 'ind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or to take arngs against a sea of trouvles,

And vy ovvosing end theng ?—"

Jamie leaned back against a fallen trunk and closed his eyes.

He was quite happy.

THE END

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

THE general trend of conversation amongst astronauts when they meet is "How soon before we reach space?" It is just as possible for us to awaken one morning and find huge alien spaceships hovering over our main cities. The resultant political and social upheaval would be more than interesting—and that's the theme Arthur Clarke has woven into "Guardian Angel," the lead novelette in our next issue.

Other stories by William de Koven, Ian Williamson, F. G. Rayer, and J. W. Groves delightful short, "Robots Don't Bleed," which was crowded out of this issue.

VOTING on the stories in the Spring issue showed a big lead for the last part of John Aiken's trilogy.

1. Phoenix Nest	John K. Aiken
2. Castaway	George Whitley
3. Co-efficient X } tied ..	A. Bertram Chandler
Adaptability	F. G. Rayer
4. Adoption	Don J. Doughty
5. Jet Landing	Francis Ashton

BOOK REVIEW

Interplanetary Flight by *A. C. Clarke, B.Sc.*—Museum Press 8/6

THE serious interest now being taken in the problems of interplanetary flight by the general public is a welcome sign, and recent press articles have at long last recognised the fact that extra-terrestrial navigation is no longer a subject for cartoon quips and jests, but a distinct possibility of the very near future.

Until now no text book upon the theory and practicability of space flight has been available in Britain at a reasonable price, but Mr. Clarke's book in the "Technical Trends Series" adequately covers the field.

It is written in a vein understandable to everyone, interspersed with a small percentage of mathematics and some sixteen art plates, and explains what has been done both in practice and in theory since the German V.2 rocket suddenly made Man conscious of his narrow air belt.

Dealing first with gravitation and its effect upon propelled flight both in take-off and landing, Mr. Clarke goes on to discuss the probable design and composition of rockets, and then devotes an interesting chapter to the problem of escape velocity, with statistics upon orbits and transit times on the Earth-Moon journey and later with interplanetary flight.

Dealing with atomic power, Mr. Clarke paints a rather depressing picture, but points out that engineering atomics is in its infancy and many answers to apparently insoluble problems will doubtless be ready when they are required. He goes on to cover spaceships and space stations and the frontiers that are opening for Man to cross. Thoroughly recommended reading.



MAGICAL NOVELTIES

LOYAL NOVELTY SUPPLIES

41 Waverly Crescent
Gidea Park, Romford, Essex

Wrist Tie

The perfect wrist tie—used by leading escapologists. The performer's wrists are tied behind his back, yet he frees himself instantly. Comes to you complete with cord and illustrated routine.

SENSATIONAL! CLEVER! 3/-

The Vanishing Key

The ordinary doorway which vanishes at the fingertips. A trick as simple as it looks

1/6

Transpo Cards

Four cards are shown and placed into a borrowed hat—you now remove one card and place in your pocket showing its face. Asking what cards are left in the hat, your audience is amazed to find only one—and your pocket contains three.

NO PALMING. NO SKILL
Complete with cards **1/6**

"Go-Kum" Pull

A gadget to produce, vanish or exchange any small object such as Silks, Sponge Balls, etc.

PRICE 3/-

QUEST

By F. G. RAYER

The Immensity of space would be terrifying to a lonely spaceclad man floating in the void—what chance of help could he expect from a silent, drifting, alien spaceship, whose crew had been dead a millenium?

Illustrated by HUNTER

KONRAD opened his eyes slowly, blinking at the streaks of light which met his gaze. His head still ached from the concussion of the explosion, but he knew they were real. They ran in vivid vertical lines from the top of the helmet visor to his nose plate. One, a hundred times stronger than the others, formed a broad band of light. Towards the sides the streaks became arcs, and the arcs circles, pivoting about a motionless, remote speck.

Konrad closed his eyes. Those spots were distant stars on the axis of his rotation. His somersaulting and persistence of vision made the other stars into complete lines. Despite his twelve stone there was no sensation of weight—nothing to show that he was not still, with the whole universe revolving about him.

It had been as quick as that. One moment he had been clambering along the hull of the old *Angriffo*, anxious to look at the stern tubes. The next there had been a tremendous concussion and the ship had leapt from beneath his feet, tubes flaming red. A dim memory of blinding light and inky darkness had followed, until unconsciousness blotted even that out. Before then Konrad had known what had happened. Everart, second-in-command, had thought it a splendid chance to gain control. A simple entry in the log-book would cover it, and no questions asked.

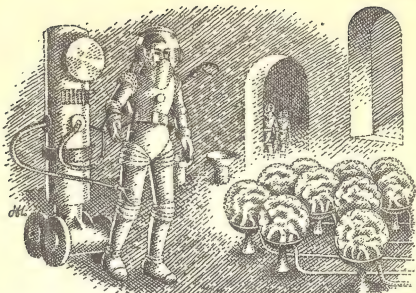
"1715 hours, 14th May, 1975. First-in-command lost in space when examining tubes."

Konrad laughed bitterly, his angular face twisted. That was it, he was lost—a tiny, living mote spinning like a top in space where there was no gravity or salvation. He, who had been among the first men to leave Earth.

The laugh echoed loudly in the helmet of his space-suit and there was a hysterical note behind it. He stopped, forcing himself to think sanely.

FLEXING his limbs, Konrad decided he was unharmed. The *Angriffo* had sped on and the rocket-blast had caught him obliquely, sending him spinning. But it had broken no bones and the suit appeared undamaged.

As he felt himself, his gloved hand touched a thong, and his eyes followed it. It extended outwards from his waist and a few feet away, captive at its end, floated his blast gun. He knew that centrifugal force was retaining it there, and he drew it in. At the other side of the belt his torch still rested in its loop. There was nothing else except the suit radio, useless here. The Earth was too distant and Everart would never reply. The oxygen indicator,



under a lens an inch from his nose, showed he had approximately twenty-one hours' supply. Twenty-one hours to live, thought Konrad.

He must try to stop his rotation, he decided. It was confusing although there was no sensation of movement. Perhaps the recoil of the blast gun would help.

The motion of the stars near his axis of movement showed he was pitching head-first. Stretching to his full six feet, he held the weapon above his head and pressed the firing button.

A blue shaft sprang from the muzzle out into space. The recoil was slight, but it was there, gently pushing back on his hand. The blast-beam did not seem to move, but Konrad knew that to an observer it would appear to be flying round and round like a firework on a pin.

Several minutes passed before the streaks that were stars began to appear less ribbon-like. By quick eye-work Konrad could follow them.

Five minutes later he had stopped firing and was hanging in a world of nothingness. The stars shone unblinkingly, brilliant pinpricks of light that slowly circled because he was now rotating about an axis in line with his body. Konrad did not try to stop it. It enabled him to survey the whole heavens.

There was no moving spark visible that might have been the *Angriffo's* rockets. Konrad released a few short bursts from the blast gun, stopping his rotation so that he was facing the sun.

It was brilliant and distant. The Earth had been visible at the time when he had left the *Angriffo* and Konrad spent ten minutes locating it. It looked like a moon, but much smaller. Nearby was Luna, a tiny marble illuminated at one side.

As he looked at the Earth, the hopelessness of his position was driven home. He could neither save himself nor summon aid. He was adrift in space, utterly alone and isolated. There could be no going back to Earth—ever.

The thought made Konrad bite his lips. It was a possibility he knew every space-man must face, but now it had become reality it was frightening. It was so very different from the rather romantic anticipation of such things, which saw all the adventure and none of the horror.

Never to go back to Earth. He had smiled as he had entered the old *Angriffo*, waving his hand because he had fixed a date with a red-head. Now that was gone. Everything was gone except life, and that was running out with the oxygen, like sand trickling through an hour-glass which held all the things he loved at one end and the frigid vastness of space at the other.

PUTTING the thought away, he turned himself, taking the sun from view. The movement brought his gaze upon something that glimmered weakly. He could not judge its distance, but it was approaching, floating slowly up, steadily as a piece of thistle-down. The sun's rays glinted on it, throwing jagged corners into relief.

As it came closer, Konrad experienced a shock. It was a piece of metal several feet long and on one side bolt-heads projected. He knew immediately it had been torn from one of the inner bulkheads of the *Angriffo*.

Konrad stared as it floated towards him. This must mean the rocket-trouble had been genuine. Soon after the ship had sped from under his feet she had blown up; the metal piece had been thrown in his direction, overtaking him. That showed he was careering through space at great speed as the fragment must have been given a high velocity by the explosion.

The twisted metal was almost opposite him now, drifting past a few yards away. Abruptly Konrad dragged his blast gun from its holster and took a long shot in the opposite direction. The floating lump seemed to become still, and then to drift back towards him as he overtook it.

He put the gun away. A few seconds later his fingers caught the corner of the metal. The relative inertia of the lump pulled on his arm and he began to turn again, circling round and round on an axis lying midway between the metal and himself.

"Like a blessed bi-luminary !" grunted Konrad.

Holding the edge of the sheet, he took a few shots into space at careful angles. The rotation ceased and they were hanging motionless in space.

Konrad released the lump and let it remain unmoving a foot before his nose. Rather to his surprise he noted one hour's oxygen had already gone. The knowledge was not encouraging. He should have some definite plan—yet what plan was possible ? he wondered. The *Angriffo* had already perished, he knew. That made his plight worse.

Soon he found that by turning the metal in the opposite direction he could make himself face any part of the heavens at will. He examined the Earth, too distant for the remotest detail to be seen. It was impossible to judge the distance, but he knew he was too far away for its gravitation to have any significant effect. Perhaps that was as well, he reflected grimly. To crash down upon terra would be a hectic finish.

He turned the fragment and looked in the other direction. For the first time he felt just how immense space was. When one was in a ship, with companions and walls, it was different. . . .

Konrad frowned, screwing up his eyes. Had he been mistaken, or was there some object far, far away to the left ?

As he stared, he became certain that he was not mistaken. There *was* something—something that should not, by all reasonable expectations—have been there at all.

It tapered to a perfect point at each end and shone dully from the sun as it moved at a tangent which must soon make it cross his path and disappear in the distance. It was perhaps half a mile away and receding.

FOR some moments Konrad could not credit his eyes. What was such a vessel doing here? Every moment it was slipping away, silent as a wraith, into the blackness between the stars. And it was moving rapidly—too rapidly for the reaction of the blast gun to drive him up to it soon enough. Could he jump? he wondered. Without taking his eyes from the mysterious ship, Konrad bent double and got the metal lump under his feet. He had to manœuvre, balancing his inertia against that of the fragment and helping with the blast gun, before he got into the position he wanted. The long, thin cigar-shaped vessel, glinted faintly, was then directly above his head, and his knees were bent.

Hoping his judgement was right, Konrad pushed downwards with all his strength on the fragment. Its resistance was slight as he kicked it into space, but he knew that he had given himself an almost equal velocity in the opposite direction.

The strange ship was drawing nearer now. No light showed from it and there was no suggestion that any drive was operating. Konrad did not know his own velocity, or that of the fragment which had been blown from the *Angriffo*, but he felt the vessel was only floating in space, its relative speed lower than his now he had cast the broken bulkhead away.

He drifted nearer until a row of shining discs which Konrad knew must be bolts was visible. The row was broken by an entrance lock. It gaped wide, a circular space like a black well in the flank of the vessel. The ship was large, running to a slender point at each end which gave no hint of the method of propulsion, if indeed there were any.

As he drew close Konrad realised with dismay that he would pass several yards to one side unless he acted quickly. There was only one way to change his course quickly enough—throw something. His hands went to his belt. Which should it be, the gun or the torch? He would not feel safe without a weapon, yet without illumination he could not see inside the ship.

Abruptly he dragged the blast gun from its thong and flung it with all his strength into space. His course changed, converging on the ship. A few seconds later his hands touched the side and his fingers lapped round the edge of the entrance.

Konrad dragged himself in and turned on his torch. The roving beam showed the entrance was large enough for a dozen men. Walls and floor curved to match the doorway so that he was standing in a gigantic tube. The tube was of metal similar to the hull and a slot showed where the door had been withdrawn to rest. Circular rings ran along each side of the tube about level with his head and he pulled himself hand over hand towards the heart of the ship.

The torch beam showed another passage at right angles to the first. It was circular and Konrad turned down it at random. There were rings along the whole of the tubular corridor and he progressed steadily, shining the torch before him.

After a few yards he stopped abruptly, the breath hissing between his teeth.

In front, bars stretched completely across the passage. They were thicker than his wrist and perhaps a foot apart. Yet it was not the bars themselves, but the way they were bent which halted Konrad.

They had been opened—he could think of no other word to describe it. *Opened*—just as a strong man would open a space between iron bars no thicker than a pencil by forcing them apart. A gap fully five feet wide loomed between the bars, which were crumpled back at each side like so much wire.

Konrad turned hurriedly and went back the way he had come, alarmed by the sight. The passage was long and progress slow. At numerous points small corridors, each circular, gave off from the one along which he dragged himself. He did not investigate any of them, but kept straight ahead. Several times he looked back nervously, but nothing moved.

THE corridor ran into a large chamber shaped like a squat tube of large diameter. Rings ran along the walls, and near one end there was a raised platform with three circular objects fixed before it.

Reaching the platform, Konrad gazed about. The circular objects resembled egg-cups about three feet in diameter. The centre one was slightly raised, and immediately before it, projecting through the platform, was a single lever. It was topped by a cup almost as large as a basin. Konrad noted the lever was gimballed at its base so that it could be moved in any direction.

Puzzled, he looked at the giant egg-cups. Each was empty. No, he was mistaken. Something glinted in the bottom of the centre one.

Bending over, he took it up. It was a circle of bronze-coloured metal, perhaps six inches in diameter. The outside was engraved with a delicate pattern, intermingled with symbols which he could not understand. The inside was smoothed, like an amulet. As he turned it over, something on his gloves caught his eyes. It was dust. An extremely fine grey dust, flaky and repulsive.

The bottom of the centre cup held perhaps an inch of it. Looking in the other cups, Konrad found they were clean. He drew back, repelled. Whatever the dust was, it had lain there undisturbed by air movement or alien attention for many, many years. What kind of beings had these been? wondered Konrad. What had torn its way from the cage back there, making the crew panic? Most of all he wondered what vast stretches of time would have to elapse before nothing but dust remained. Disruption would be infinitely slow unless the body of the thing he knew had sat in that cup was of a substance which could evaporate even in those conditions. How long would he himself last, before time itself crumbled away the suit?

The thought brought back his own position. Two hours had passed since he had caught the fragment of the old *Angriffo*, if the oxygen indicator was to be believed.

He retraced his way and explored the side corridors. They led into rooms that had apparently held stores. In one was a covering of dust littered with slender, barbed spikes that might have served as nails or screws. The others were empty. One circular door would not open.

Konrad returned to the main corridor, grasping one of the rings. The calamity that had swept through the ship chilled him, although it had taken place endless ages previously. He looked at the cage, where the bars sagged,

then down the long drain-like passage to where the mysterious cups remained. For some reason unknown, he shivered.

After pondering he returned to the large chamber. The three cups looked grotesque. Passing them, he noted for the first time that at each side of the projecting lever was a small conical depression. Nothing else was visible.

Tentatively he put a hand in the depression and pushed, gripping one of the cups so that he was not thrust upwards. The side portion of the platform slid down, opening along imperceptible cracks. Below lay an assortment of controls and cross-bars, apparently forming some sort of navigating instrument. The symbols on the controls told Konrad nothing. About one row of projecting spindles faint rings of dust lay, as if insulated control knobs had faded to nothing with the passing millenniums.

He opened the panel upon the other side of the lever. There were no controls or apparatus, only a screen of some translucent material with a centre hair-line. Dotted over its dark surface were tiny flecks of light; as Konrad watched they moved slowly. At the first glance Konrad knew here was a view of the heavens, provided by some optical collecting system which could function indefinitely.

He pondered. This was obviously the control-room, but where were the controls? One single lever, with a depression such as these creatures had seemed to find necessary, was little enough with which to pilot a space-ship. Would it be dangerous to try? Perhaps, but this was not the time to hesitate at such possibilities, he decided. There was barely enough oxygen left for eighteen hours.

The control moved easily under Konrad's hand, scarcely resisting his touch. He pressed it forward.

Nothing happened. There was no vibration of concealed machinery; no tug of acceleration that betokened movement. Disappointment replaced his excitement, giving way to astonishment as his eyes strayed to the star-screen.

The specks of light were moving downwards, crossing the screen with slowly increasing velocity. For a moment he stared, then he dragged the lever back well past its central position. Again there was no sensation of movement, but the images on the screen gently stopped. After a few seconds they began to float upwards. Konrad hastily returned the lever to neutral.

What forces lay here? he wondered. What drove this ship through the heavens when there were no rocket-tubes or apparent means of propulsion? And what mysterious force so neutralised his inertia as to leave no indication of their breathless acceleration?

THE star-pattern was still moving slowly from their momentum. Grasping the lever, Konrad moved it gently to one side. The pattern began to turn, wheeling slowly so that each spot formed an arc. Then there was a click, sensed rather than felt, and the lever went free. At the same moment a picture impinged on Konrad's mind. It was wordless and distorted as if recorded on some apparatus which time had almost destroyed, but its purport was unmistakable.

"You have done well. I am the Captain but can never personally fulfil my mission. You are physically suitable for our purpose, and your action prove you are highly intelligent."

The picture faded. It had been vivid as a dream, and the sense remained, appalling Konrad by its significance.

He wrenched at the lever, twisting and pulling on it fiercely. It moved freely under his hand but without result. Automatic apparatus had taken over the control of the ship—for what purpose he could only yet guess—and the lever was disengaged. The screen showed the vessel was settling to a course heading away from the sun.

Dragging himself awkwardly down the corridor, Konrad gained the port. He paused in the circular opening. Panic and the fear of the unknown urged him on, but reason held him in the doorway. If he sprang out into space it would be the end.

Panting, he stood in the opening. A slight vibration trembled through his suit and flashing his torch around he saw the circular door was slowly closing, impelled by hidden machinery. If he waited too long there would be no chance of flight.

As he stared something long and slender snaked out of the gloom. Konrad jumped back, sweat starting to his brow, then smiled crookedly. It was a space-man's line of a type he had seen a thousand times before. It could only mean there were other survivors from the *Angriff*, thrown in the same direction by the explosion.

He grasped a ring and tugged in the rope. At the end a big man in a red space-suit swung awkwardly, a second and smaller individual clinging desperately to one leg. They were barely in the circular corridor when the door closed, shutting out the wheeling stars.

KONRAD coiled up the halyard slowly as the newcomers gained their feet. The big man was Everart; his action in firing the rockets had been calculated murder. Konrad almost wished he had let his second-in-command drift past to be lost for ever.

Everart was shaken, but his brutish self-confidence was visibly returning. He stared at Konrad, all the mock subservience he had shown in the *Angriff* gone.

"Saw your torch flashing about and drifted ourselves in with gun-blasts." Everart eased the weapon on his hip and Konrad saw the dark eyes glint as they noted he himself had no blast gun. With more arrogance he continued: "What is this ship, anyway?"

Konrad shook his head, weighing up the men. Everart was dangerous. The other was a subordinate, overawed by Everart's bulk and probably not to be trusted. Both had their blast guns and torches.

"Beats me," said Konrad quietly. "It's under automatic control. There's nothing to indicate the destination."

Something prevented him adding more. The other two could learn for themselves.

"We'll see," grated Everart. He slapped a hand on the small man's shoulder. "Come on, O'Connor. Stick by your boss!"

They moved off awkwardly down the corridor, Everart's discordant laugh still coming to Konrad's ears over the suit radio. He shrugged, following slowly. Everart's manner would change when he found they were prisoners in the ship and there was no way to turn it for Earth.

In the control room Everart was already juggling with the lever. He faced Konrad angrily.

"How does this condemned thing work?"

"It doesn't," replied Konrad evenly. "We're flying under the control of automatic apparatus. I may be wrong, but I suspect the creators of that apparatus died more years ago than we can count. If so, the end of this voyage will be a strange affair."

Some time passed while Everart stormed and tried unavailingly to find some means of controlling the ship. Konrad followed them on a careful exploration through the vessel. Blank walls met them everywhere. There was no indication of where the automatic apparatus might be located, or sign of a bulkhead behind which the engines might lie. Konrad had begun to note the passing of time by the oxygen indicator. It showed him there was seventeen hours supply left when they halted before the single locked door.

"I'm going to have a look behind here," growled Everart. "Stand back."

He looped a hand in one of the rings along the passage and adjusted his blast gun for heat. There was a tiny star-shaped indentation which could only be a key-hole near one edge of the circular door and the metal round it began to glow from the fierce heat beam. It turned white, then began to stretch like jelly as hidden springs pulled on the door. With a snap which sent globules of molten metal floating round them, the circular panel flew back.

Konrad peeped through the opening. The light from his torch glimmered on a score of tiny reflecting orbs which sparkled and moved like eyes in the dark. With a curse Everart drew back, his gun held ready.

FROM the depths of the compartment the eyes followed the movement. Konrad made out a row of tiny creatures, but they did not advance. Their bodies gleamed like black enamel; their eyes shone vividly with life and intelligence, turning from one man to the other with jerky swiftness. As he stared at them Konrad instinctively knew they were beings of high intellect and reason. Their stillness proved it. They realised the power of the weapon Everart held and their unblinking, crystalline eyes seldom strayed from it for long.

"Is it t-their ship?" asked O'Connor uneasily.

Konrad looked at the man's narrow face, pasty-white behind his visor.

"No. They're too small to even move the lever up for'ard. They're captives, like us and the thing which was imprisoned back there." He jerked a thumb down the corridor. "This ship was made for some peculiar purpose I can only guess at. The thing in the cage was not suitable for that purpose, nor these tiny creatures. We are."

Everart looked back quickly. "What in hades do you mean? What purpose?"

"That we'll learn—if the oxygen lasts," retorted Konrad. He nodded towards the group of eyes, now watching him fixedly. "They might be clever but they're too small. Perhaps the thing in the cage was big enough but unintelligent. We're a balance of brains and brawn—just what this ship set out to find."

He turned abruptly and began to pull himself back along the corridor. He did not want to confess it, but there was a singing in his ears and his eyes felt heavy. Alone in the control room he examined the suit for a flaw and found none. Yet something was wrong. The singing seemed to be in his very brain, rising and falling rhythmically. His forehead felt constricted, so that he longed to snatch off the helmet.

Near one of the giant cups he stopped, scarcely able to move. He cursed. It was dangerous to feel like this with Everart prowling the ship. He had something Everart coveted and would want to take—oxygen for seventeen hours.

As he stood there, wondering why the pulsating rhythm sang in his head, Konrad suddenly realised the appearance of the control room had changed. Beyond the lever a panel had opened, revealing apparatus that cast a luminous radiance, rising and falling like violet shadows. Behind the intricate tubes and connections an enormous balance wheel moved slowly, as if it had beaten out thousands of years and could continue until the end of time.

Konrad stared, dimly he realised that the rhythm echoing in his brain was more intense when the violet light was brightest. The apparatus itself was beating out this strange, semi-sonic metre, sweeping away his consciousness so that nothing remained but the singing in his head. As his consciousness began to slip Konrad knew it was no use fighting. Here was something he could not hide from or defeat. He had become the tool of some destiny greater than man.

Besides the fused circular door Everart and O'Connor sagged motionless. Everart's gloved hand was still grasped round the butt of his blast gun; O'Connor's arms were outstretched, as if he had been about to scramble down the corridor when consciousness went.

From inside the chamber eyes blinked, staring at one man and then the other. As time passed a movement ran through the creatures, then they began to creep slowly towards the door, their legs finding grip where a man's eyes could have seen none. In the corridor they stopped of one accord, their bodies tilting in unison as their gaze passed over the motionless humans. They remained thus for several moments, then a wave of uneasiness passed through them as if some extra sense told them of the endless void outside and they knew they could never return to the world which had given them life.

KONRAD'S first conscious thought was to look at the oxygen indicator under its lens. Seventeen hours supply. He could not believe it. Some unconscious sense told him a long, long period had elapsed since the rhythmic vibration had enfolded his senses in forced sleep.

"So you've come round."

Turning, Konrad met Everart's eyes. In their sulky depths regret showed. "We've been awake an hour or more," continued Everart. "Guess you had a stronger dose of—whatever it was."

Konrad took that in slowly. It meant some kind of suspended animation had been induced in them. While unconscious they had not breathed. That meant he now had one hour's oxygen more than Everart and O'Connor. Before he could speak Everart added an oath.

"And those damned things took my blast gun! Can't find it anywhere."

Konrad felt relieved. His difficulties were great enough without an armed tough to contend with. He noted O'Connor still had his weapon, and that the little man watched Everart warily. A guarded truce had come into being between them, with O'Connor sullen and antagonistic, the only man armed. The creatures had known O'Connor was not dangerous, Konrad realised. But he might become so now—if Everart did not take his weapon first.

The thought brought others. The complex machinery was still functioning

and if they had been allowed to awake that meant the end of the voyage was near. With a shock Konrad realised gravity was now holding his feet firmly to the curved floor. He looked at the star-screen. It showed a long sloping ramp of dusty grey colour, flanked by low buildings of similar hue.

"We landed some minutes back," growled Everart, following Konrad's astonished gaze. "Don't like going out unarmed."

His beady eyes flickered to O'Connor's weapon. O'Connor drew back a pace, hostility contorting his face.

"Don't try anything, either of you, or you'll regret it," he grated.

Konrad shrugged. Brushing past them he made his way along the corridor, to halt in the circular door, which was now open. A great curiosity encompassed him. Was he now about to learn the meaning of that mysterious and rather frightening picture-message? he wondered.

The ramp stretched away into the distance in each direction. A great furrow lay in the direction they had come and Konrad blinked in amazement as he looked around.

A layer of fine dust many inches thick spread over everything within view.

He stepped out of the port, sinking in to his ankles as if in powdery sand. The dust stretched undisturbed to the buildings. Neither in them nor the higher constructions jutting up behind, perhaps half a mile away, was there any sign of movement. As he looked round Konrad thought nothing could be more desolate. Even the sky was a uniform steely-grey, cloudless and chilling. Had the strange vessel fulfilled its quest too late? he wondered.

AT the sound of curses and rasping breath he turned. Everart was adjusting his helmet and his voice was a queer mixture of anger and self-pity as it came over the reproducer.

"Damned air's unbreathable!" he gasped. "We'll have to keep to the suits."

Konrad's spirits sank. He had perhaps sixteen hours supply left. Everart and O'Connor had one hour less.

He made his way slowly towards the low buildings. A double row of tinted windows looked flatly at him. Nowhere in the whole scene was there the slightest movement.

At a gap directly opposite the ship he stopped. His brows rose and excitement stirred his blood. Between the buildings was a *trail*. The roadway was visible, smooth and pink where the dust had been brushed aside. The trail ended level with the buildings. As he looked at it Konrad felt there was only one explanation—something had come from the buildings behind and made its way to the junction. It had looked out upon the ramp, as if expecting to see the ship waiting there. Then, its mission fruitless, it had turned and retraced its way. During years uncounted it had done that, keeping a narrow way clear through the accumulating dust. The knowledge made him feel very small. During countless centuries that thing must have come slowly down towards the ramp, looked out, seeking the ship, then slewed about and returned whence it came.

"There's something coming," declared O'Connor's voice nervously behind him.

Lifting his gaze Konrad saw an object had just turned into view and was advancing down the pathway it had made. The size of a man, it ran erect on

overlapping wheels. Three jointed arms were folded symmetrically round its middle and a single pellucid disc near the top faced directly towards Konrad.

Slowly, as if the operating mechanism was almost worn-out, it brushed between the flanking slopes of dust. Instinctively Konrad drew back and the machine halted where it had halted so many times before. Its single eye stared towards the vessel and it turned slowly from side to side. Looking down, Konrad saw endless repetitions of that movement during the ages before the return of the ship had worn a saucer-shaped depression in the roadway.

Then the robot quivered, long-disused mechanisms clicking into action. One arm stretched out jerkily, dislodging a tiny heap of dust which had rested between it and the body. At the same time a second wordless picture impinged on Konrad's mind. The images were abstract, but somehow he understood. The message was one of overjoyed welcome, relief and thankfulness.

Konrad smiled against his will. The robot seemed *glad* he was there; he felt it was more than a mere machine running to some complicated pattern impressed on its mechanisms.

"Lead the way!" he said, pointing in the direction the robot had come.

Behind, Everart plucked at his arm. "You're not going with that walking tin-can? If I had my gun I'd melt it to scrap."

The robot had turned and drawing himself away Konrad followed. The machine turned right at the end of the road, passing through a door which opened automatically. Following closely, Konrad found himself in a large building. He had expected no other moving thing, either living or mechanical, and there was none.

They stopped before a closed door. Konrad waited attentively, expecting what was to follow. Pictures began to form in his mind, explaining many things which had puzzled him. They spoke of a strange race approaching a state of perfection when further advance would be difficult. They showed machinery complex beyond his understand and populous cities where life was as near perfect as it could be. Then they showed a split in the race, when one branch devoted itself to mental pursuits and problems and the other to supporting their more intellectual fellows and cultivating physical well-being. Long periods followed until the divergence created two races. Konrad saw organisms that were little more than gigantic brains, cared for in every way by the second branch of the original race. Then he saw an unknown pestilence sweep over the planet, killing the creatures of fine physique while the helpless, immobile brain-creatures remained unharmed. He saw the last survivors of the physical race build a robot and set off in a space ship. Then followed an endless period of waiting, terminating in an image of himself and joy.

HE understood. Some things were not yet clear, but he realised the brain-creatures could not live for ever without outside care. The second branch had perished, so the ship had been sent on a lone, desperate quest, searching through the universe for beings which could save the intellectual branch from death. It had been a long search.

A new picture broke into his thoughts. He knew he was now to be taken into the presence of the creatures themselves. At the same moment the robot made a beckoning gesture and the door slid open.

Konrad found himself in a spotlessly clean hall with tinted windows admitting a soft, warm light. At one side was a row of deserted cups similar to those in the vessel. Turning his gaze from them, Konrad found his attention riveted by something in the centre of the chamber. Although expecting it, he still felt surprise.

A cluster of globes lay in cradles. Tubes and wires ran from them into some hidden apparatus behind. Konrad stepped closer. The transparent globes were filled with a chocolate-coloured substance which pressed tightly up against the container in convolution after convolution. Little tremors and movements ran through the substance continually; near the bottom was a dark mass of rudimentary limbs and organs.

The robot touched Konrad lightly on the shoulder and pointed to one side. There was a strange mechanism of pads on articulated arms. At the same moment an image of himself with the pads pressed about his head and body sprang into his brain. A picture of intricate recording apparatus within the robot followed, then a vivid scene in which the robot and he conversed verbally without hesitation.

He nodded, moving towards the apparatus. It was some kind of psycho-recorder, he decided. After it had been applied to him the robot would understand his language and communication would be complete.

Rather gingerly he took his place under the machine and the arms dropped until he was surrounded by discs. A picture of himself speaking and thinking came into his mind, and he gave his tongue and imagination free rein. As he spoke and thought, the words and ideas seemed to be whisked away, like moisture being absorbed by a blotter. . .

EVERART stood outside the door, looking into the chamber. A few yards behind him O'Connor peeped round the big man's body; his face was lined and his lips twitched. Not for many seconds was his hand removed from the blast gun. A queer expression crossed Everart's face as Konrad took his place under the machine and the pads hid him from view.

"What's happening?" mumbled O'Connor.

Everart shrugged his heavy shoulders and turned his back to the scene. "Don't know or care. Our plan is to get out of here. We'll take the space ship."

"But we can't fly it," objected O'Connor.

"Maybe we can find how to. Or that walking can will show us how." He jerked his head towards the robot, which was waiting motionless before the psycho-machine. "It seems to know most everything. We can grab it and threaten to melt it down if tricks won't work. The sooner the better, so long as *he's* out of the way."

O'Connor glanced towards Konrad nervously. "You—you're not going to leave him behind?"

"Why not? Everart laughed harshly. "Nothing could suit us better. Just as soon as I can fix it we start back—and there'll only be *two* on the trip that way, believe me!"

Everart finished with a chuckle and stood, hands on hips, his brow furrowed in thought and his eyes devouring the scene. For a long time his gaze rested on the motionless robot, as if weighing up its weaknesses and capabilities.

His stance was arrogant and behind him O'Connor drew himself up, drawing confidence from the strength of the giant before him.

"That is all," said the robot. "We shall be able to understand each other very clearly now."

The discs withdrew and Konrad stepped out from beneath them. He noticed that Everart and O'Connor were not in sight, then turned his attention to the machine that had addressed him.

"You have been very willing and we shall always be grateful," it continued. "I am glad to speak to you. I was made with many abilities but there are many things I cannot do. Often I had despaired anyone would come. I had looked for the vessel many times before it returned."

KONRAD thought of the trail through the dust and wondered for just how many years the machine had searched for the ship as it ran to the complicated pattern its creators had arranged.

"I'm ready to help all I can," he stated. "What'll I do? Time's limited, though." He cast an eye on his oxygen indicator. It showed a little over fourteen hours supply remained.

"Why?" asked the robot.

"Because I breathe oxygen. When my supply is gone I die."

"Die," repeated the robot. "That is what happened to my masters' brothers. On all our planet there is nothing such as you call oxygen. We have no machinery to make such things."

"Then let's get to work." Konrad stifled the disappointment he felt. It had been foolish to hope for food and breathable air on a planet as utterly unlike Earth as this one was, he realised.

"Very well." The robot turned and began to roll smoothly across the glassy, tinted floor. "Follow me. It is a simple thing my masters wish. My masters' brothers gave me an electronic voice so that I could speak and a brain that could remember all things, but my arms are too crude." It waved them round and Konrad saw each ended with a simple pincers arrangement. "The ship was gone too long."

"Tell me about it," interrupted Konrad quickly. "I've been wondering how long it was since it started off."

"How long." The robot echoed the words and was silent. Then it continued: "It is best you never know. You could not comprehend. We will simply say it was a *very* long time."

Konrad nodded. He knew an immeasurable period had elapsed and that if he could realise its full immensity it would form a cloud in his mind he could never forget.

"And the ship itself?" he asked.

"It took all the manual ability of my masters' brothers to build it after my masters had thought for many years upon its form. It had automatic mechanisms to guide it if the crew should die."

And a test to find some creature of sufficient mental and physical ability, thought Konrad. The lever had been that. After the crew had died the ship had sped on, perhaps landing when its mechanisms showed the proximity of a planet, to wait a certain period before shooting off again on its quest. He had tripped new machinery when he had moved the lever; its purpose

BOOK BARGAINS

FOR THE HOME LIBRARY

● We offer hundreds of fiction and non-fiction titles originally published at prices from six to fifteen shillings, every book impeccably mint and in dust-wrapper, at only **2/6** each, post free

● ● A few typical titles include:

"HOW NOW BROWN COW" (<i>E. C. Jones</i>)	Published at 7/6
"VISIT OF THE PRINCESS" (<i>R. H. Mottram</i>)	" " 9/6
"SUMMER IN 3000" (<i>Peter Martin</i>) ..	" " 8/6
"THE BEWITCHED BROOMSTICK" (<i>C. Duncan</i>)	
JUVENILE	" " 4/6

NON-FANTASY

*"STRUMPET'S FOOL" (<i>Frank Griffin</i>) ..	" " 8/6
*"APPOINTMENT WITH MY LADY" (<i>Frank Griffin</i>)	" " 8/6
"PHANTOM FEAR" (<i>Kay Seaton</i>)	" " 8/6
"SONG OF BERNADETTE" (<i>Franz Werfel</i>) ..	" " 6/-
"TESTAMENT OF YOUTH" (<i>Vera Brittain</i>)	" " 6/-

* *Extremely sophisticated modern novels—both highly recommended.*

● ● ● Your name and address on a postcard will bring our interesting booklet, free and post free.

Write NOW to:

J LIBRARIES

31 Curzon Street, Mayfair, London

(GROsvenor 5837)

accomplished, the ship had sped for home. Suddenly Konrad realised he did not know how long that journey had taken.

"How far is it to Earth?" he asked quietly.

"Very, very far."

Something in the voice which issued from the tiny grilled opening expressed more than the mere words. In a flash Konrad knew—beyond all doubt—what those words meant. Very, very far, the robot said. Much, much farther than could be travelled with fourteen hours oxygen supply, it might have added.

"I see." Konrad licked his lips.

He followed the robot silently. They passed by the globular vessels in which the convoluted substances moved slowly, circling towards the end of the hall where pieces of machinery lay. Konrad jerked a thumb towards the globes.

"What does that—*stuff* do?"

The robot turned its single eye, following his movement. "The masters? They *think*."

TO Konrad there seemed nothing more to say. They halted before the machinery. Large parts of it were assembled, but many smaller items obviously remained to be fitted. The robot waved one arm over the mechanisms.

"Long, long ago the masters thought out a machine which would work for them for ever, providing all they required. That was after their last brothers had left in the ship. For centuries I worked on that machine, following their instructions. But my hands are ill-suited for delicate adjustment." It shaped one of its pincers expressively. "A time came when I could do no more. Nor could I build a machine which would continue for me, or change my own arms to ones more suited. So now the masters wish you to complete this task."

Konrad nodded understandingly. "They knew how they wanted the thing but couldn't do it themselves and had no one to do it for them. But that wasn't the real idea when the ship was sent out."

"Possibly not," agreed the robot. "The ship was sent for any beings which could replace the masters' brothers. The masters knew a time would come when they needed aid. They are helpless."

Under the robot's direction Konrad began to assemble the remaining parts. He found it scarcely more difficult than putting a watch together when his outside gauntlets had been removed. Once, as he rested, he saw Everart peer in at the door, to withdraw after a few moments' hesitation.

After a time he began again, not trying to understand the purpose of the components he assembled, even if that were possible with no knowledge of the larger parts already completed. The robot stood besides him, giving instructions crisply. Sometimes Konrad's gaze strayed from the work to the oxygen indicator. When the last part was finished barely eleven hours supply remained. He sighed and sank back on his heels, wondering what Everart and O'Connor had been doing. He envied them the hours they must have spent exploring. Yet the robot and its masters appeared singularly harmless and he did not feel justified in causing their destruction by refusing to co-operate.

"I am pleased," said the robot when Konrad turned. "This machine will

provide larger containers for my masters. It will nurture their growth and it can build other machines like itself, or to patterns the masters think out. The masters can exist for always now, without their brothers or the aid of any living thing."

"But why?" demanded Konrad, "What can they *do*?"

"They do that which satisfies them beyond all else. They think."

The robot rolled towards the globes and came to rest between two discs.

"What are you doing?" asked Konrad curiously as it turned to face him.

"It is through these discs my masters speak to me." The machine was silent for some moments. "They are pleased and grateful," it continued.

"Then ask them to get me back to Earth!" said Konrad.

After a few moments the robot made a negative gesture. "They say they have no use for mobile life. It is a low form which must die from the universe. My masters say that even I have fulfilled my purpose, and that a thing without a purpose is superfluous."

AS the robot finished electric fire began to arc up and down between the discs. Before Konrad's stupefied eyes the robot seemed to twitch and strain, its eye flashing red and its internal mechanisms groaning. He realised it was being destroyed before his gaze and the knowledge made him spring to activity. Two steps took him to it. With a gloved hand he grasped one wheel and heaved the machine out from between the discs. The flash and crackle of the arcs ceased.

The robot made a few jerky movements. "You have not let me be destroyed," it said, an odd note in its voice. "I am grateful."

"I judge they can't touch you unless you're between the plates," grunted Konrad. "Am I right?"

"Yes."

"Then leave 'em to stew in their own juice and you're all right."

He turned about and strode for the door. The thought of the faithful machine—even if it was nothing more—being destroyed had repelled him. He did not want to see the giant brain-creatures, who looked upon mere thinking as the ultimate activity of living beings; he did not want to watch the robot, in case some force impelled it back to the discs and destruction.

FROM behind a flanking wall Everart watched Konrad stride out of the building. In his big hand O'Connor's blast gun rested. O'Connor's oxygen had replenished his supply so that Everart now had nearly twenty-two hours store in his containers. An ugly grin twisted his face and he began to follow Konrad, moving silently through the dust and keeping in the shadows which were beginning to huddle about the buildings as the sky turned from grey to black.

Konrad walked on unsuspectingly, the insoluble problem of escape occupying his mind. If he entered the ship he could not fly it, he knew. If he could fly it the ten hours' oxygen remaining would be hopelessly inadequate. Difficulty had been added to difficulty until this was the end.

The ship, tapering and slender, shone dully on the ramp. Konrad wondered at the powerful creature which had been trapped in the cage, and the tiny, intelligent animals whose horny bodies had not suffered from lack of air. They had tumbled from the ship behind him, burrowing through the dust and vanishing.

"Stick up your hands and don't try anything funny!"

The abruptness of the order made Konrad jump. He spun round to find a blast gun a foot from his chest. Above it Everart's lips curled in a snarl behind the visor.

"I'm going to take your oxygen containers," Everart continued coldly. "You'll die anyway, but a few extra hours supply may be all I need."

Konrad did not move. It would be suicide to do so.

"You'll never get back," he said quietly. "You can't fly the ship."

"I can try. Perhaps I can persuade the juggernaut you've been such pals with to give me a few hints."

In his heart Konrad knew argument was useless. He might shoot at any moment. But behind him the robot itself was silently coming up, moving with difficulty through the dust.

"Thirty hours' oxygen won't get you back to Earth," said Konrad, one eye on Everart and one on the robot. "You'll die with blood on your hands but it won't save you."

EVERART'S face paled. His lips drew back in a snarl and he raised the weapon, aiming.

"I'll chance that."

He had scarcely spoken when a metal arm flashed round his body. Pincers closed over his wrist so that he screamed. A second arm snapped round the blast gun and flung it fifty yards away into the dust. Gasping and cursing, Everart was tossed aside.

"You saved me from destruction, master," Konrad saw the robot was addressing him. "I am grateful."

Then its arms closed round his waist, gently but firmly lifting him. Whirring quietly, it rolled up the entry into the ship. The door closed behind it, although Konrad was sure it had touched nothing. It dropped him in the control room by the giant cups.

"Now home to Earth," it said.

Konrad watched while the machine adjusted apparatus behind a panel. Apparently a full knowledge of the vessel had been impressed on the robot's mind and it was adjusting the controls so that the ship would re-trace its course. In a few moments the screen showed they were moving; the ageless buildings began to drop below in the gloom, very small.

"You're forgetting I haven't enough oxygen to last the journey," murmured Konrad as the robot finished.

It turned, its eye regarding him placidly. "I will turn on the long sleep during which you do not breathe." It touched a control and the radiance Konrad had seen before began to rise and fall. "Do not be afraid. I am watching and am grateful."

As the musical, hypnotic sound began to rise and fall in Konrad's mind he knew he could trust this machine completely. It had lived so long; it had felt gratitude and that made it more than a mere robot. Only one question remained in his mind as consciousness began to slip, and he knew he would soon know the answer to that.

Would days, months, or years have elapsed on this mysterious journey? When he reached Earth he would know. . . .

THE END

NEW WORLDS

FANTASY BOOK CENTRE

Offers the only COMPLETE Science-fiction & Fantasy Service

● BOOK SERVICE

1. Continuous research enables us to offer EVERY future publication of both English and American publishing houses. In addition we have good stocks of most recent Science-fiction and Fantasy Books.

2. Collectors will wish to buy the books we have, but for others we offer a **Guaranteed Library Service** which features every new book in stock, and a fine selection of out-of-print fantasy.

3. **Second-hand Books.**—All enquiries for rare and hard-to-find items will receive the expert attention of our **SPECIAL BOOK-FINDER SERVICE.**

● MAGAZINE SERVICE

1. Future issues of every British and American Science-fiction and Fantasy magazine on publication.

2. Back issues of magazines where available for collectors and readers. Want Lists receive individual attention.

3. Any magazine bought may be returned for credit if not required.

4. **Magazines Bought.**—Collections or single items. Send details for our Cash Offer.

WRITE TO-DAY for free lists and catalogues. By placing your name upon our mailing list you are ensured of regular valuable information on all phases of Science-fiction and Fantasy.

● GNOME PRESS OF NEW YORK (Sole European Representatives—Fantasy Book Centre) announce the following NEW books:—

Immediately available:

- | | |
|---|------|
| 1. The Carnelian Cube (<i>Pratt and de Camp</i>) | 19/6 |
| 2. The Porcelain Magician (<i>Frank Owen</i>) | 19/6 |
| 3. The Thirty-first of February (<i>Nelson Bond</i>) | 19/6 |
| 4. Pattern for Conquest (<i>George O. Smith</i>) | 16/6 |
| 5. Sixth Column (<i>Robert A. Heinlein</i>) | 16/6 |
| 6. Men against the Stars (<i>Ed. Martin Greenberg</i>) a superlative anthology of modern stf. | 19/6 |

Forthcoming:

- | | |
|--|------|
| 7. Castle of Iron (<i>Pratt and de Camp</i>) | 16/6 |
| 8. Minions of the Moon (<i>William Grey Beyer</i>) | 16/6 |
| 9. Cosmic Engineers (<i>Clifford D. Simak</i>) | 16/6 |
| 10. Conan the Conqueror (<i>Robert E. Howard</i>) | 16/6 |

● ● ● SPECIAL—Don't miss the Gnome Press Fantasy Calendar for 1950, illustrated Cartier/Bok in superlative artistry. Price 7/6 or free with every order of two or more Gnome Press books

... for further information, discounts to dealers, enquiries, write to

FANTASY BOOK CENTRE

25 STOKE NEWINGTON ROAD, LONDON, N.16, ENGLAND

Telephone : CLIssold 5541

OUT SOON—The First Issue of a New
Nova Publication

SCIENCE-FANTASY

QUARTERLY—ONE & SIXPENCE

A magazine for the imaginative, featuring the best science-fiction by British authors, and presenting articles of unique interest to all who are fascinated by scientific fact and theory

No. 1
SUMMER
1950

Stories by J. M. Walsh, Arthur C. Clarke, John Russell Fearn, P. E. Cleator, E. R. James, Christopher Youd. Articles by Walter Gillings, Thomas Sheridan, Geoffrey Giles, etc.

Order your copy from your newsagent NOW

In the event of difficulty, write to the publishers :

NOVA PUBLICATIONS
25 STOKE NEWINGTON ROAD, LONDON, N.16

TALES OF FANTASY

British Editions of
Popular American Magazines

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION

price **9^D** each

THRILLING WONDER STORIES

JUNE ISSUES NOW ON SALE

OBTAINABLE FROM YOUR NEWSAGENT

If in difficulty write to :

ATLAS Publishing & Distributing
Company Limited
18 BRIDE LANE, FLEET ST., LONDON, E.C.4

Just Published.

*The FACTS about
Space Travel.*

INTERPLANETARY FLIGHT

An introduction to Astronautics

By

A. C. Clarke, B.Sc.

We are about to enter the age of interplanetary travel — first by radio-controlled unmanned rockets, and later by true "space ships." In this book Mr. Clarke, assistant secretary of the British Interplanetary Society, describes the problems to be solved before space travel becomes a reality and surveys the progress of the last decade.

Illustrated.

Price 8/6 net. By post 9/-

TEMPLE PRESS LIMITED
BOWLING GREEN LANE, LONDON, E.C.1